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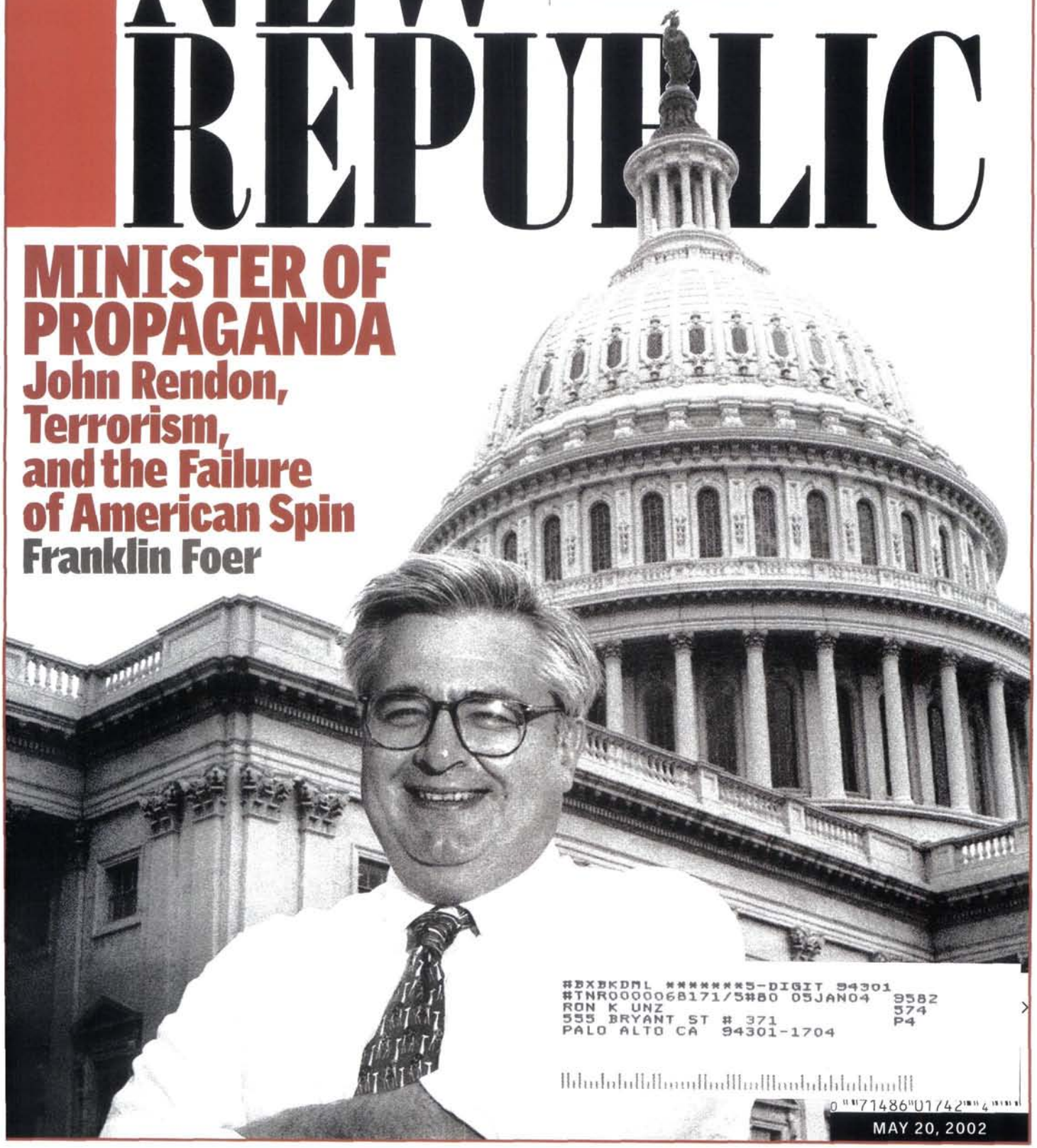

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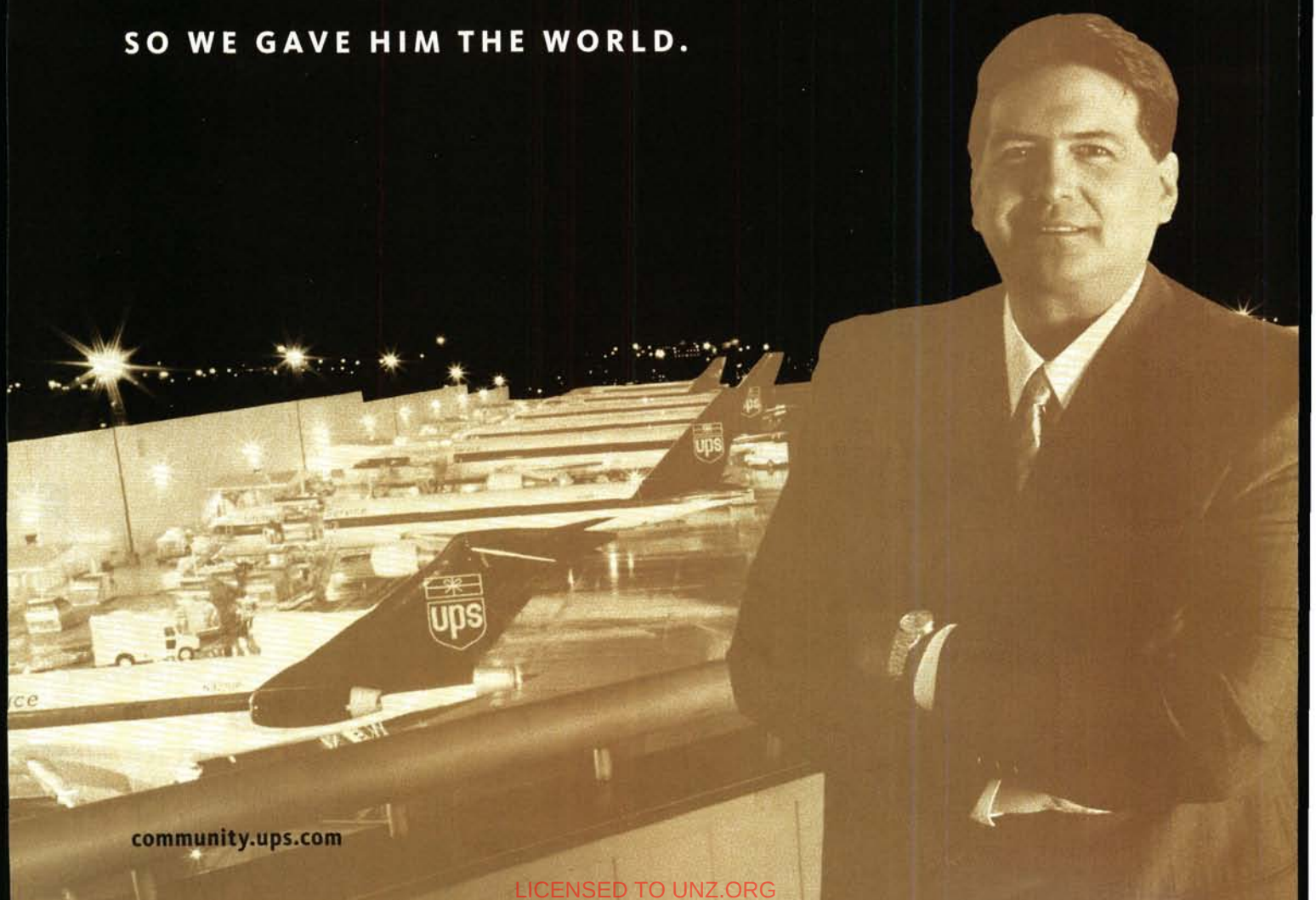

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CORRESPONDENCE

Church doctrine

TO THE EDITORS:

As an Episcopalian with ties to the Church in Boston, I was pleased by Martin Peretz's decision "to go local" by commenting on the recent anti-Israel statements of the three bishops of Massachusetts ("Killer Angels," April 15). One of the most disturbing aspects of the September 11 attacks has been the way in which "liberal" Christians have turned the violence of Muslims into an occasion to single out Jews for censure. September 11 has not only helped resurrect anti-Semitic impulses that are deeply rooted in Christian theology, but it has also revealed the particular vitality of those ideas within the culture of the Episcopal Church and other mainline denominations.

The newfound sympathy of Church leaders for the Palestinian cause and their denunciations of Israel seem indistinguishable from the contempt with which the Protestant social elite has always regarded Jews. The bishops' actions brought to mind chilling images from the past of vested prelates reproving the obduracy of Jewish people, and Peretz is very right to highlight the anti-Semitism implicit in what they said.

GARDINER H. SHATTUCK JR.
Warwick, Rhode Island

The little prince

TO THE EDITORS:

I think Janine Zacharia missed the point of the Saudi initiative ("Cover Boy," April 1 & 8). It was another step by the royal family to thwart America's war on terror. Already the Saudis have refused the United States intelligence help, not cracked down on the mullahs, and continued to provide money to Al Qaeda. But that isn't enough. For the Saudi royal family to survive, it must keep Iraq a dictatorship.

The Saudis know that if we see hundreds of thousands celebrating freedom in Baghdad, then Prince Abdullah and the 30,000 thieves will be under tremendous pressure, which they may not survive. So Saudi Arabia has to keep Saddam Hussein in power at all costs. Simply put, the presentation of this supposed "peace" plan was brilliantly designed to obscure the hugs of brotherhood exchanged between Saudi and Iraqi thugs at the Arab summit.

NATHAN D. WIRTSCHAFTER
Encino, California

Team players

TO THE EDITORS:

John B. Judis's article in the April 1 & 8 issue was welcomed by me since—as a

rank-and-file member of Local 631—I have been working on lawsuits about the seizure of a democratically elected local by the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) and the attempt to destroy the Teamster contract for the Las Vegas convention industry by the hierarchy of the IBT ("Dirty Deal"). To me the only logical reason for this is that Teamster President James P. Hoffa is in bed with President George W. Bush on the nuclear waste problem and had to do something to destroy the convention contract. It would be very hard for a Teamster president to say that destroying 2,000 Teamster jobs in the convention industry and replacing them with 100 union or nonunion truck-driving jobs would be a good thing.

BOB TARBOX
Las Vegas, Nevada

TO THE EDITORS:

John B. Judis's screed employs so many half-truths and innuendoes that space limitations preclude a point-by-point rebuttal. Judis fails to mention that the goals of the Consent Decree are twofold: to establish direct elections of the union's leadership and to eradicate the influence of organized crime on the union's leadership. The evidence shows, and unbiased observers generally agree, that both measures have been achieved. Under Hoffa's leadership, the union passed a "Democracy Package" at the 2001 International Convention that established the principle of "one member, one vote" as a permanent part of the union's structure. This is a measure that the so-called reform movement that controlled the 1996 convention failed to even bring to the floor. It is Hoffa who created an internal anti-corruption program, RISE (Respect, Integrity, Strength and Ethics), to replace the government oversight mechanism. Despite Judis's theorizing, the government's Independent Review Board (IRB) has not charged one union leader with organized crime association in more than five years.

And it is Hoffa who implemented financial controls at the International Union to protect member-dues monies. In fact, the federal government and the union recently reached an agreement ending the five-year existence of the government-installed Independent Financial Auditor. Judis is enamored by the IRB, which in the early years of the Consent Decree did in fact perform many services. Yet this board failed to prevent former Teamster President Ron Carey and his cronies from stealing the 1996 election through a dues-swap scheme that sent nearly $1 million in union dues to Carey's reelection campaign. Carey was banished from the union, and a number of his associates were convicted for their roles. Without government supervision the union ran a clean election in 2001.

Judis's reactionary piece misses the point: that trade unionists have always fought for free, *independent* unions to shield them from government abuses. In regards to the case of Mike Bane [the president of Local 614 near Detroit], the IRB banned Bane for perjury relating to events from the mid-1980s. If Bane had organized crime connections through the 1990s, as Judis asserts, Bane would have been banned for associating with members of organized crime—not for perjury.

The William Hogan Jr.-Dane Passo case is still before the IRB, but that hasn't prevented Judis from playing judge and jury or from ascribing guilt. While comments from unnamed sources are taken at face value, Hoffa administration officials are referred to parenthetically as defensive (e.g., "Caldwell dismisses the Bane case"; "[t]he Teamster president and his assistant insist they never learned the full details"; "Hoffa dismissed the meeting"). While it would be inappropriate to comment further on a case still pending, the record of the Hogan-Passo affair—even by Judis's reckoning—demonstrates that

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the Teamsters' internal anti-corruption efforts work. Yet Judis refuses to acknowledge that once Hoffa learned of concerns, he put a stop to it and ensured that no contract was signed. Moreover, Judis conveniently fails to mention that a third individual charged in the case, Ed Jacobson, was exonerated by the IRB. The RISE program proved its effectiveness, and the Hoffa administration responded quickly and decisively.

What do the Teamsters want from Bush? The same thing we wanted from Bill Clinton: a fair shake for America's working families. Our ANWR policy is driven by two things only: creating tens of thousands of new jobs and enhancing America's energy security which, incidentally, is of more than passing interest to members of a transportation union. To suggest some kind of quid pro quo for our support is both erroneous and slanderous.

Hoffa has never discussed the Consent Decree with Bush; nor have our respective staffs. I made that point abundantly clear to Judis on March 15, when he called me to comment, giving me one day to respond to a nearly 5,000-word smear. Of course, including this essential detail would have been inconvenient to Judis's predetermined conclusions. Perhaps that is why he failed to mention it. Instead, he maintains the opposite, without even pretending to have a source.

BRET CALDWELL
Communications Director
International Brotherhood of Teamsters
Washington, D.C.

JOHN B. JUDIS REPLIES:

In the course of accusing me of playing fast and loose with the truth, Bret Caldwell manages to dispute exactly one minor detail in my article, and he gets it wrong. He suggests that Hoffa ally Mike Bane was not banned from the union by the IRB for "organized crime connections through the 1990s." Here are the facts: Bane, a union official, was banned for "intentionally misleading" the IRB about his association with organized crime figures. In ruling last month on Bane's appeal, Federal Judge Loretta Preska said, "Bane intended to prevent the IRB from discovering the full scope of his association with organized crime members. Bane's misconduct was thus extremely serious and warranted a most severe sanction." These associations, as the IRB report detailed, stretched into the '90s. Yeah, he wasn't banned for associating with organized crime figures. He was banned, as I wrote clearly in my article, for lying about whether he associated with them. That's pretty much it for the factual side of Caldwell's letter.

Caldwell claims that the Hogan-Passo case I recounted demonstrates that the Teamsters' "internal anti-corruption efforts work." He's entitled to his opinion, but I think the facts demonstrate the opposite. In the summer of 2000 Hoffa's appointee and longtime ally William Hogan Jr. took him to lunch in Chicago to meet with Dane Passo—also a Hoffa ally and appointee—and Chicago businessman Richard Simon. Simon had been trying through Hogan and Passo to work out a deal in Las Vegas that would have had the effect of replacing Teamster and other union workers with low-wage nonunion workers furnished by Simon's labor-brokering company. The deal was openly discussed at lunch, so Hoffa knew about it. Then in September 2000 Hoffa and his assistant Carlow Scalf were warned by former prosecutor Ed Stier, whom Hoffa had put in charge of the internal anti-corruption effort (RISE), that Simon was, in Scalf's words, "involved with some crime figures in Chicago, that he was a bad guy."

At that point, Hoffa, if he believed his own anti-corruption chief, had good reason to fear that Hogan and Passo, through their association with Simon, were about to plunge the union back into its darkest days—but he did only one thing: He stopped Passo from negotiating a formal contract with Simon. He retained Passo as his personal representative to the local and even gave him a raise. He did nothing to curtail Hogan's activities on behalf of Simon or to prevent the local from acquiescing in informal arrangements that allowed workers from Simon's firm to displace Teamsters and other union workers. Hoffa finally pulled the plug on Hogan, Simon, and Passo in March 2001—six months later—because, as he recounted in his testimony, he became worried about "the things that have happened with the IRB." If the IRB had not begun taking depositions in Las Vegas that winter, Hogan, Passo, and Simon might still be wreaking havoc in Local 631. I don't think government supervision of unions is a good thing, but in the case of the Teamsters, it has been the lesser of two evils.

I did not recount in my story any conversation between Hoffa and Bush about the IRB. Things don't happen that way in Washington. I wrote that what Hoffa wants most from Bush is not ANWR, but an end to the IRB, and that many of his public gestures of friendship toward Bush and the Republican leadership—and his endorsement of anti-labor Michigan Representative Peter Hoekstra—have been toward that end. ■

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TRB

FROM WASHINGTON

Bad Move

LAST WEEK A friend wrote me the following: "I think we are seeing the beginning of a great shift in Jewish politics—at the very least, I think we'll see a new respect for men like Tom DeLay and Dick Armey and President Bush." He may be right. In the 1980s and 1990s, with the culture war raging, fear of the Christian Right defined American Jewish politics. And that fear led most American Jews to scorn the alliance between Jewish neoconservatives and evangelical Christians. But that's changing. Today culture-war issues like school prayer and abortion are dwarfed by the threat to Israel. In such an environment, even many liberal Jews are willing to join forces with ardently Zionist evangelicals. Janet Parshall, former spokesperson for the Family Research Council, addressed the pro-Israel rally in Washington last month. Last week the Anti-Defamation League republished a column by Ralph Reed. And in the House, DeLay co-sponsored a resolution supporting Israel with liberal Democrat (and Holocaust survivor) Tom Lantos.

The standard argument against this rapprochement is the old one: Jews must eschew Christian conservatives because, whatever their views on the Middle East, they threaten religious freedom at home. I'm not convinced—both because in recent years Christian conservatives have grown less interested in changing secular culture than in retreating from it; and because, at a time like this, Israel's security matters more than nativity scenes on statehouse lawns. But there's another argument: American Jews should shun the Christian Right because Zionism is not only a national tradition; it's also a moral one. And Christian conservatives like Armey and Parshall don't merely misunderstand that moral tradition; they disfigure it beyond recognition.

Last week Armey discussed the Middle East on MSNBC's "Hardball." "I'm perfectly content to have a Palestinian state," he declared. "I am not content to give up any part of Israel for that purpose of that Palestinian state." Host Chris Matthews seemed puzzled: "Well, where do you put the Palestinian state—in Norway?" And then Armey spelled it out: "There are many Arab nations that have many hundreds of thousands of acres of land—and soil and property and opportunity to create a Palestinian state." Israelis have a word for what Armey was suggesting: "transfer." Matthews botched the term, but he got the idea: "So you would transport—you would transport the Palestinians from Palestine to somewhere else and call it their state?" Armey concurred: "Most of the people who now populate Israel were transported from all over the world to that land, and they made it their home. The Palestinians can do the same." Amazed, Matthews gave Armey one more chance to pull back: "Well, just to repeat, you believe that the Palestinians who are now living on the West Bank should get out of there." Armey's reply: "Yes."

The next day Armey said the exchange "does not reflect my views." But Jerry Falwell has made similar statements. And Parshall had said virtually the same thing on "Hardball" less than one week before. She began her April 26 appearance by proposing that Israel annex the West Bank. "And what do you do with the Arabs?" asked Matthews. "You move them over to Jordan, which is already seventy percent Palestinian," Parshall replied. Once again Matthews gave his guest the chance to recant. "You said get them off the West Bank," Matthews summarized. And Parshall finished the thought: "And put them on the eastern side of the Jordan."

Among mainstream Israeli and American Jewish leaders, such views are considered monstrous. The overwhelming majority of Israeli politicians and intellectuals oppose deporting the Palestinians, because they speak in the shadow of the Holocaust. Even the ultra-far-right Moledet Party of assassinated Tourism Minister Rehavam Ze'evi—which seeks to make the Palestinians citizens of Jordan—does not suggest physically moving them. A recent poll by Tel Aviv University's Jaffe Center for Strategic Studies showed that 46 percent of Israelis supported transferring the Palestinians. But rather than embracing the sentiment, Israeli leaders treated it as an embarrassment—a sign of how deeply suicide bombings were distorting the Israeli psyche. As the Jaffe Center's Hirsh Goodman explained, "I cannot conceive that a Jew would see putting people on a railway carriage and transferring them anywhere. It is totally inconceivable that the Jewish state would do that." He's right: After all, polls taken at roughly the same time showed that 70 percent of Israelis would abandon settlements for peace.

And the Holocaust isn't the only reason Israeli politicians oppose transfer. They oppose it because most of them see the West Bank's value as strategic, not theological. And because it's strategic, it's not absolute: Even Ariel Sharon supports a Palestinian state (under different leadership) on part of the West Bank. In 1997 Benjamin Netanyahu himself surrendered 80 percent of the biblically precious city of Hebron.

The debate between Labor and Likud is largely empirical: How much land does Israel need to be secure? And that empiricism enforces moral restraint. It keeps Israeli politicians from succumbing to the religious and nationalist fantasies that animate the messianic wing of the settler movement. Even for hawks like Netanyahu and Sharon, the land is a means to achieving security; it is not an end in itself.

But for Christian conservatives like Armey and Parshall, Israel's interests cannot be defined pragmatically, because Israel's primary function is to clarify a larger worldview. Whether or not most evangelicals truly believe Israel's wars will usher in the Messianic Age, they are theologically conditioned to see its struggle as Manichaean. That's why Parshall believes Israel should annex the West Bank—an idea most Israeli hawks consider self-defeating: It would remove any ambiguity from Israel's claim to the land. As Oklahoma's James Inhofe, one of the Christian Right's closest allies in the Senate, put it last December in a speech entitled "An Absolute Victory": "God appeared to Abram and said, 'I am giving you this land'—the West Bank. This is not a political battle at all. It is a contest over whether or not the word of God is true."

Christian conservatives dress up their support for Israel in the language of anti-terrorism and democracy. But they pay scant attention to the fight against terrorism in biblically insignificant countries like Sri Lanka, India, and the Philippines. And on Israel's behalf, they propose the most anti-democratic measures imaginable. In truth, there is no secular moral rationale for the Christian Right's support for Israel because, for the Christian Right, Israel's claims are moral only insofar as they are biblical. That runs counter to the mainstream Zionist tradition, one of the great achievements of which has been to establish moral claims to Jewish statehood—claims Israel incarnates as a liberal democratic state—that do not rely on scripture.

And it raises a question that Jewish allies of the Christian Right should ponder: What will people like Armey and Parshall do when Israel takes actions—such as leaving much of the West Bank—that undermine the biblical justification for its existence? Ultimately, if you don't love Israel for what it is, you can't be trusted to love it at all.

PETER BEINART

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Where We Stand

A commentary on public education and other critical issues

Summer Learning

By SANDRA FELDMAN, President
American Federation of Teachers

As spring turns to summer, flowers bloom, children move from schools to pools, and state governments begin to make their difficult decisions about what they will be able to allocate in the coming year for public services like education. Unfortunately, though it may be beautiful outside, it will be no picnic for these policymakers.

This year, with budgets already strained by the recession, states are dealing with the effects of irresponsible decisions made in states and by some in Congress about tax cuts that will further shrink the funds available for education and other critical public services that have an impact on children and families. So, at a time when the pressure on schools to "produce" is greater than ever, bad fiscal policies are having a severe impact on the quality of education in many states.

More than 17 states have already reduced or are considering reductions in funding for K-12 education, and at least 40 states have been forced to consider budget cuts that may affect education. To mitigate cuts in what they consider "core" educational programs, lawmakers have turned to cutting early childhood, arts education, and before- and after-school programs. But all of these have contributed mightily to the progress in achievement that so many of our students have been making.

Harming the most vulnerable

In some states, districts are eliminating arts, music, and after-school programs; others have announced they will have fewer buildings open for summer school this year. And some have been forced to propose cutting after-school tutoring and other programs as a result of existing deficits and new shortfalls.

The worst part of these shortsighted cuts is that the most vulnerable and poorest children in the most severely underfunded schools suffer the greatest harm. As a group, poor students enter kindergarten with fewer academic skills and less knowledge than middle-class and more affluent students. And it grows increasingly tough for them to catch up as the years go by.

We know that early learning opportunities and extra tutoring, along with rich summer school experiences, help narrow the gap. And yet, the more advantaged children still retain an edge. This is in part because disadvantaged young people are more susceptible to what is known as the "summer effect." Over the summer, while affluent students continue activities that contribute to advancing their gains, poorer students, whose families can't afford extra tutoring, computers, museum trips, or summer camps, fall back. The importance of leveling the playing field for disadvantaged youngsters becomes abundantly clear.

Short-sighted budget cuts will do long-term harm to the education of our children.

Budgets that cut education in the short run will end up with higher costs to society in the long run. Cities and states—as well as the federal government—have a responsibility to support education. This is especially important now that states and districts, under the new Leave No Child Behind Act, have significant new roles.

The increase in federal funding this year targets resources to disadvantaged children. Those funds can be used for preschool, extended-day, and extended-year programs and will aid states struggling to provide extra help for poor children. But the commitment to this kind of funding must continue in subsequent years. To do otherwise is bad budget policy, bad education policy, and just plain bad for children. So is the vast underfunding of many effective programs targeted to disadvantaged young people. Head Start, for example, the early childhood education and care program that receives federal funds, currently reaches only one-third of eligible children. Fully funding Head Start, with a strong focus on proven programs that help with school readiness and early reading skills, would be an important first step toward meeting our national commitment to provide a quality early learning opportunity for all children.

Narrowing the achievement gap

We have made great strides in education in this country in recent years, and many communities are beginning to narrow the achievement gap between rich and poor by raising academic standards, reducing class size, and putting research-based instruction into classrooms.

As the summer approaches, some families will head off to vacations and many students will take a break from their textbooks. But for other young people, it is a critical time to make up ground, reinforce the progress made during the school year, or get additional enriching educational opportunities. Wise investment in education is to our children as spring showers are to blooming flowers. ▮

The AFT's on-line learning calendar (www.aft.org/calendar) is a fun resource to help keep students involved in learning all summer long.

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Making Hay

WHEN HE RAN for president, George W. Bush declared that "the best way to ensure a strong, growing, and vibrant agricultural sector is through a more market-driven approach." But just as Bush has abandoned his avowed capitalist purity to endorse new subsidies for the energy industry and tariffs for steel, he is now preparing to greatly expand government subsidies for agriculture. These recent deviations from free-market orthodoxy have been dramatic enough that it's tempting to conclude the president has no coherent economic philosophy at all. But that isn't quite true. A clear pattern has lately emerged: When intervention in the market would benefit a wide range of Americans—say, a substantive patients' bill of rights or a prescription-drug plan—Bush opposes it. Ditto for an intervention that would actually make the economy run more smoothly—as in the case of reforms to the accounting industry. Indeed, it seems only when a market intervention lacks a compelling economic rationale *and* helps the few at the expense of the many—as in the steel, energy, and agriculture decisions—that the president sets aside his free-market principles. Call it "uncompassionate unconservatism."

The reason is that while only intermittently pro-market, Bush is steadfastly pro-business. Just how far the president is willing to bend the former principle in service of the latter can be seen in the farm bill he is preparing to sign into law. Singling out favored industries for support is the most heavy-handed, least justifiable kind of socialism. Yes, it's hard to run a family farm; and many have disappeared over the last century. But it's hard to run any small business. Just as huge agribusiness has edged out family farms, Wal-Mart has edged out family hardware stores—but nobody contemplates massive federal payments to ensure the survival of the local Ace Hardware. Opponents of farm subsidies dwell on the fact that a small number of giant agribusinesses scoop up the lion's share of subsidies—and it is indeed ironic that crop payments underwrite the very factory farms they're supposed to curb. But even if farm payments did go only to small family farmers, they would still lack any moral or economic justification.

The nation's intellectually indefensible farm policy survives because of rural America's disproportionate political power and a cultural mythology that celebrates its supposed moral superiority. Bush indulged the latter when he appeared before a cattlemen's convention earlier this year to endorse farm subsidies. "I appreciate so very much the fact that the cattleman usually doesn't spend a lot of time asking something from the federal government," Bush declared—neglecting to mention the $460 million worth of grazing subsidies per year the cattle industry ferociously defends. He went on to praise his audience for upholding "the values of hard work, of faith, and family."

When farm-subsidy proponents go beyond such agrarian propaganda, their efforts border on the comic. "It's in our national security interests that we be able to feed ourselves," Bush declared at the same speech, recycling an argument currently in vogue. The implication is that without farm subsidies we couldn't feed ourselves. But that's absurd: The United States was agriculturally self-sufficient before farm subsidies. And even if that weren't true, how exactly would it violate "national security" for the United States to import food? There's little chance of our being starved into submission by an Iraqi naval blockade.

How bad is the farm bill? Not only will it add billions to our ballooning budget deficit, but it will also further undermine America's rapidly deteriorating trade leverage—how can Bush tell other countries not to protect their industries when he's doing exactly that? And agricultural subsidies specifically harm the Third World poor. An upcoming World Bank study shows, for instance, that the African nation of Burkina Faso could cut its poverty rate in half were it not for global cotton prices artificially depressed by First World subsidies. Responding to such complaints, Larry Combest, the House Agriculture Committee Chairman, told *The Washington Post*, "This is for rural America. This is not for rural Mexico." Such parochialism is to be expected from Congress. But the job of looking out for the broader national interest falls upon the president. Bill Clinton, one may recall, sided with congressional Republican reformers six years ago to sign a bill that tried to phase out crop subsidies. Bush now presides over that reform's dismantling.

You would think that if there were one clear benefit to having an economic conservative in the White House, it would be the opportunity to dismantle government programs that are both wasteful and unnecessary. In the case of George W. Bush, you'd be wrong. ■

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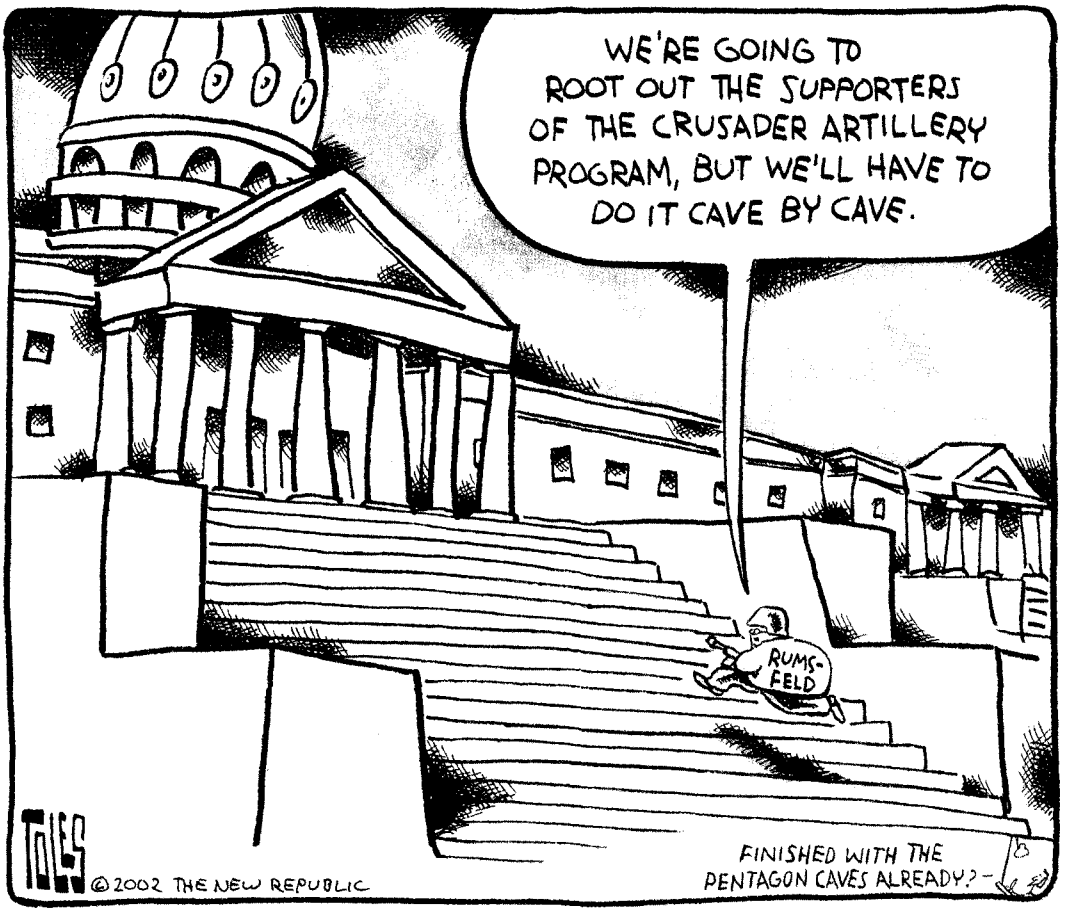
NOTEBOOK

ONCE AGAIN: The timing was demonically perfect. President George W. Bush and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon were sitting together in the Oval Office when an aide brought the terrible news: A suicide bomb had exploded in a pool hall in Rishon Letzion; at least 15 Israelis were dead, and some 60 others were wounded. Ever since the Israeli army's offensive in Jenin last month, there has been a lot of loose talk about "massacres." Well, this is what one really looks like: the killing of civilians not as the regrettable by-product of a military operation that took care to target only combatants, but as a deliberate, premeditated act. This has become the Palestinians' signature brand of warfare. The mullahs and the Marxists, and the theocrats and the secular revolutionaries, have all reached a consensus that this is the best way to pursue their people's aspirations. In fact, the scene has now become so hideously familiar that the international players react almost by rote. Sharon went home and convened his security Cabinet. Yasir Arafat's p.r. flack, Saeb Erekat, announced that the Palestinian Authority "once again" declares "its rejection and condemnation of such terrorist attacks." (The "once again" signals that nothing has really changed.) Kofi Annan, who has been rather graphic when denouncing Israel, chose a similarly insipid formulation. But at least one country's leaders spoke frankly. The day before the attack, representatives of various Muslim governments discussed terrorism in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. According to the Associated Press, Sheik Salleh Abdul Aziz Mohammed al-Sheik declared, "The suicide bombers are permitted. The victims are considered to have died a martyr's death." The country from which this pro-suicide-bombing official hails? Saudi Arabia, the very country the Bush administration has enlisted to pressure Arafat to eschew terrorism in return for American pressure on Sharon. After the murders at Rishon Letzion, that strategy has been exposed as a farce, and it should be condemned, once again.

LAMAR!: Since September 11 it's become de rigueur for politicians to spin any position they've held, any legislation they've proposed—basically, any experience they've ever had—as somehow related to "security." And it's no surprise that perhaps the most comical example of this tendency comes from current Tennessee Senate candidate Lamar Alexander, a man whose 1996 and 2000 presidential runs broke new ground in rhetorical vacuity. A recent Alexander ad proclaims that he "was named education secretary during the Gulf war to help President Bush strengthen our country." And thank goodness. Had the war dragged on for another ten years, we would have needed well-educated new recruits. Sadly for Lamar's contribution to American security, that wasn't the case: The war was over two weeks *before* he was actually confirmed by the Senate. Coming next: How plaid shirts helped us beat the Taliban.

WHAT'S GOOD FOR THE GOOSE . . . : Back in December Elizabeth Dole was taken to task in this space for trying to attract conservative voters to her North Carolina Senate bid by abandoning her moderate positions on gun control. Now that the Senate is debating fast-track trade powers for the president, however, Dole has become a model of principled consistency, standing alone among eleven candidates in supporting the trade bill—an unpopular position in cotton country. But wait, you say. Surely Erskine Bowles, the Democratic front-runner, supports fast-track. After all, Bowles is a firmly centrist Democrat, a former head of the Small Business Association, a NAFTA supporter, and a former Clinton White House chief of staff who lobbied furi-


WE'RE GOING TO ROOT OUT THE SUPPORTERS OF THE CRUSADER ARTILLERY PROGRAM, BUT WE'LL HAVE TO DO IT CAVE BY CAVE.
RUMS-FELD
TOLES
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FINISHED WITH THE PENTAGON CAVES ALREADY?

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ously for fast-track when it last came before Congress in 1997. ("It allows America's companies to compete on a level playing field with their overseas competitors," Bowles wrote at the time.) Alas, now that Bowles is a candidate in a state whose textile industry has been hit hard by free-trade agreements, he has rethought his position, opposing fast-track—"for this president or any other future president"—on the grounds that recent trade agreements have caused North Carolinians too much hardship. Bowles will have a tough fight against Dole in the general election, but he's already matched her in the pander primary.

NADER'S NADIR?: Give Ralph Nader this: He's become a real politician. During his ego-fueled 2000 spoiler campaign, Nader argued that even if votes for him tipped the election to George W. Bush, there was no difference between the Texas governor and Al Gore anyway. Well, they did, and there was. So while continuing to pay halfhearted lip service to his original claims, Nader has lately been trying out a new argument: Whatever impact his candidacy had on the presidency, it also helped the Democrats take back the Senate. As he argued in a *Slate.com* dialogue with *Atlantic Monthly* writer (and former Nader's Raider) James Fallows, "the Greens can take credit for sending Maria Cantwell to the U.S. Senate—thereby giving the Democrats a 50-50 split and setting the stage for Sen. Jeffords' switch to Independent and tipping the control of the Senate to the Democrats in June 2001. Sen. Cantwell won over the incumbent, Sen. Gorton, by a mere 2,300 votes, and, absent a Green senatorial candidate, my 103,000 votes went heavily for Cantwell." There are a couple of obvious objections to Nader's new argument: First, one-vote control of the Senate is not the presidency. Second, no one could have plausibly predicted Jeffords's switch. But there's a deeper problem as well. As Fallows pointed out, Nader campaigned aggressively *against* Cantwell in the Democratic primary—and even after it. According to the *Seattle Weekly*, after Cantwell—a high-tech millionaire—won the nomination, Nader called her victory "exhibit number one" in the case against money in politics and described her earlier House career as "distinctly mediocre." But despite Nader's attacks, Cantwell won. In other words, the Democrats now control the Senate because most Washingtonians don't listen to Ralph Nader. Now there's an argument we can get behind.

LIVING UP TO HIS NAME: When Harvey Pitt was named Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) Chairman in August, many commentators (this magazine included) doubted he could effectively regulate the industry he once represented. And early indications suggest that those commentators were exactly right. In late April, Pitt met with Eugene O'Kelly, the chairman of the accounting firm KPMG, while the SEC was investigating his firm. In an e-mail to his staff, O'Kelly said the two discussed the investigation. (Pitt denies it.) Last week Pitt gave an interview to *The New York Times* in which he vigorously protested his innocence. Discussing his career as a lawyer for the accountants he now prosecutes, Pitt insisted, "I represented pretty much everyone, and, as a result, I am beholden to no one." But this is akin to a former mob lawyer justifying his appointment as director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation on the grounds that he represented *all* the mafia families, not just the Gambinos. Sure, the accounting firms disagree sometimes. But on most important issues, they share exactly the same interest—notably, lax enforcement from the SEC. With Pitt as chairman, they appear to be getting it. ■

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Who says the economy is bouncing back?

Reality Checks

By Noam Scheiber

For a period in March, you couldn't open a newspaper without encountering new evidence that the economy was on the mend. The long-suffering manufacturing sector was suddenly expanding; housing purchases had increased sharply; consumer spending was surging. And the economy was adding jobs for the first time in months. "Greenspan declares an expansion; in a week of positive news," read a headline in the March 8 *Washington Post*. "Economists see recovery faster than anticipated," added the March 11 *Los Angeles Times*.

Yet just as the symphony of upbeat statistics was reaching its crescendo, with news that the economy had grown at an astonishing 5.8 percent annual rate in the first quarter, the economic tone began to shift. In late April we learned that housing purchases had actually declined in March, as had orders for business equipment and durable goods like cars and refrigerators. Bellwether companies like Microsoft and IBM reported anemic profits, sending the stock market into a funk. And last Friday came the biggest disappointment: April's unemployment rate was the highest in eight years, as the economy added fewer than 50,000 jobs while 565,000 Americans were entering (or reentering) the job market. Meanwhile, the Labor Department revised the modest employment gains of February and March—originally reported as an additional 60,000 jobs created each month—downward into overall losses.

And so, not surprisingly, economists who a couple of weeks ago were crowing have since begun to hedge. When the GDP numbers came out on April 26, Ken Mayland, president of the economic consulting firm ClearView Economics, triumphantly declared, "Growth is back!" Eight days later he seemed decidedly more subdued. "The recovery is persisting," he told *The Wall Street Journal*. "However, companies, in general, are not going to get aggressive about rehiring until the economy puts in a track record of improved prospects."

Given the barrage of conflicting economic information—good news in March and most of April, bad news ever since—there's a natural impulse to average out the positive and negative indicators and come up with an economic prognosis like that offered by Mayland and most other economists: gradual but stable recovery. But the behavior of the economy can't be reduced to the average of its various statistics, whose interpretation can be arbitrary in the absence of any underlying theory. To take a recent example, even cash-strapped consumers will buy at cut-rate prices, but the bargains themselves may be a sign of weakness. And the problem with the generally upbeat predictions of Mayland and others is that the theory saying the economy is on the upswing is a lot less convincing than the one saying it's not.

To the extent anyone has a theory about why the economy is recovering so fast after such a mild and short recession (apparently less than one year in duration and with only a single quarter of negative GDP growth), it revolves around increased flexibility. The idea—call it the "new new economy thesis" (the old new economy thesis having been based more on Internet hype than on any analytical foundation)—is that, thanks to recent technological and financial developments, it's now possible for companies to adjust to recession-causing imbalances faster and less painfully than ever before. Among others, this thesis has won support from Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan, who cited "flexibility" and "resilience" when talking up "the recuperative powers of the U.S. economy" in his February 27 testimony before Congress.

As laid out in great detail in a March 4 *Wall Street Journal* article, these changes have occurred primarily in two areas. First, innovations in information technology—such as supply-chain management software—have enabled manufacturers to slow production in response to a drop-off in demand more quickly than in the past. According to the *Journal*, inventories topped out at an average of 44 days' worth of shipments last year, compared with 53 days' worth during the 1990-1991 recession. Because one of the chief determinants of the length of a downturn is the amount of time it takes businesses to liquidate their inventories, the argument goes, this shortened the recession considerably.

Second, innovations in financial instruments helped limit the pain inflicted while these adjustments were taking place—specifically by propping up consumption. For example, auto manufacturers were able to offer zero-percent financing deals because investors have increasingly bought up bundles of auto loans as securities: The *Journal* reports that 32 percent of auto loans and leases were "securitized" last year compared with only 15 percent in 1990. (Had the markets not been willing to finance these loans, credit-strapped automakers would have found it impossible to finance the deals on their own, which would have led to a huge drop-off in car sales.) Ditto for the housing market. Banks leery of hanging on to mortgages themselves could simply bundle them together and sell them to investors. This made it easy for people to refinance their homes, cash out their equity, and keep right on spending.

But there is an alternative theory for what's taken place over the past few months, most passionately articulated by Morgan Stanley economist Stephen Roach. Roach and like-minded economists—let's call them stubborn realists—don't necessarily deny that new technology and financial instruments have had a short-term impact on the economy. They're just skeptical that these innovations can correct the underlying imbalances holding the economy back. For example, while suppliers may have cut production more quickly than ever, that tells us nothing about how quickly they cut back on the equipment and personnel used to make all the excess inventory in the first place. And it's only when that excess *capacity* is gone that businesses will be able to turn a profit again. Likewise, while individuals may have kept on consuming during even the darkest post-9/11 hours,

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Schooling in the Mobile Society

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America is a mobile society. In fact that has been one of its strengths; the American labor market adjusts to changes more quickly than virtually any other labor market in the world. But mobility has its costs. Family moves, whether for new job opportunities, improved housing, or adjustment to divorce, lead to frequent changes of schools. These school changes take their toll on some children.

Moreover, **the negative effects of moving are not only experienced by the children who move; all students in high-mobility schools, including nonmovers, tend to be affected.** Teachers must continually adjust to movements in and out of their classrooms, and these adjustments detract from learning.

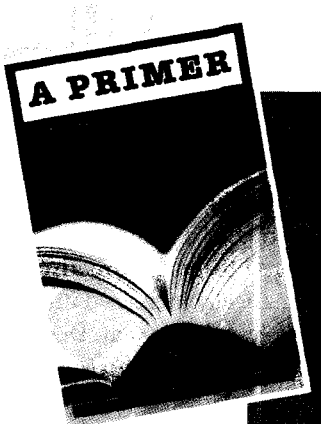
Also, the impact of high mobility is not evenly dispersed across the population, instead falling more heavily on disadvantaged children. Disadvantaged children—who are likely to come to school less well prepared than advantaged children—also move more frequently. These moves are unlikely to lead to any improvements in their schools. Higher-income parents can exercise more choice, taking schools into account when they move because of their ability to choose from a wider variety of housing opportunities. But restricted housing choices plus the concentration of high-mobility families leave lower-income children worse off.

Improving the education of disadvantaged children has been and should be an important policy goal. But **the issue of school mobility highlights the difficulty of policy development.** First, public schools should do more to take mobility into account. The highest mobility rates occur in large central cities, where poor children are likely to go to school. But, while decrying the problems of high mobility, many large systems have not aligned curricula and programs across schools to lessen the disruption of moving. Second, many people argue that improved schooling for poor kids requires more fundamental change, such as school choice, on the grounds that individual schools can develop innovative programs and that these programs can be one of the gains of more parental options.

The two policy options are not necessarily in conflict. Improved school choice mechanisms—ones that separate school attendance from the specifics of residential location—might stabilize schooling for some low-income children. If parents could maintain the same schools for their children even if forced by other circumstances to move, the achievement of low-income students (both moving and nonmoving) might improve. It is difficult to determine, however, whether this effect is sufficient to overcome forces that tend to increase the costs of family moves. As is often the case, developing the best policy outcomes involves trade-offs and experience.

— Eric A. Hanushek

Paid for by the Hoover Institution, Stanford University.



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that tells us nothing about how eager they will be to keep spending in the future. Indeed, it suggests that they have continued to pile up debt that will eventually force them to cut back. When you further consider that, prior to the recession, businesses faced the most serious overcapacity problem they'd seen in decades—and consumers had already piled up unprecedented levels of debt—you begin to understand why the stubborn realists doubt the recession has run its course.

This debate isn't simply over how to interpret recent data; it's over the meaning of recessions themselves. New new economists tend to see recessions as mere interruptions of economic growth, to which the proper response is getting back to positive territory as quickly as possible using any means necessary—e.g., zero-percent auto financing. By contrast, the stubborn realists see recessions as a way of purging the excesses that make sustained growth impossible. Whether that purging process is complete before the recession officially ends is ultimately beside the point. Indeed, while the 1990-1991 recession was one of the shortest on record, unemployment continued to rise for *15 months* after it was declared over. And compared with the excesses in productive capacity and debt we had going into this recession, the problems we faced in 1990 look like mere statistical errors. That means the stagnation could drag on for years—at least three if you ask Roach.

So which theory is right? Admittedly, the last few months have made it difficult to tell. New new economy proponents could point to the spate of bullish economic data as evidence in their favor. Meanwhile, stubborn realists such as Roach could point out that all but one recession since the late 1950s was followed by one or two quarters of growth before a relapse into negative territory, as companies mistook businesses' need to rebuild inventories for a resurgence in consumers' demand for their products. They could also note that a variety of onetime flukes—like the warmest winter in decades—boosted spending on housing and consumption goods to unusually high levels.

But if bad statistics continue to roll in, the new new economy line will look less and less plausible. After all, if the reason the economy took off earlier this year was that the various adjustments an economy makes during a recession have sped up, then we shouldn't be faltering again. And in fact, not only do the latest numbers not support that "faster adjustment" argument; they actually favor the stubborn realists. Disappointing profit reports mean businesses aren't likely to start hiring anytime soon. (They may even lay off more people.) And if businesses aren't hiring, then those unemployment numbers will probably keep heading in the wrong direction, which means the recent softening of consumer spending will only continue—a development that would undermine the one thing that's been propping the economy up for the last year and a half. Even worse, because of America's record-high debt levels, a decline in consumer spending could be sudden and dramatic: It's hard enough to keep spending if you've lost your job. It's a lot harder if losing your job makes you default on your debt.

And that's the crux of the problem. For all their ostensible success in explaining how the recession ended, the new new economists now find themselves at a loss to explain how the recovery gets started amid all these pitfalls. (Some point to rising productivity, but that works by bolstering companies' profits, and so far those profits haven't been bolstered.) They may still be right—it wouldn't be the first time. But when economists base their predictions on a theory that explains only half of the recent evidence, it doesn't exactly inspire confidence. ■

Don't give Bush's judges a hearing.

Judge Not

By Jason Zengerle

In the hierarchy of famous dates, May 9 rates pretty low—its biggest claim to fame came in 1960, when the Food and Drug Administration approved the world's first commercially produced birth-control pill. But among Republicans, May 9 has become very significant. The reason? On May 9, 2001, President George W. Bush nominated his first eleven candidates for the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. Now Republicans are threatening to bring the Senate to a standstill—this May 9—to protest the fact that the Democratic Senate has confirmed only three of those eleven; the remaining eight have not even been scheduled for hearings.

Republicans argue that the "Hearingless 8" (as *The Weekly Standard* has dubbed them) represent only a few of the victims of the Senate Democrats' "obstructionism." Of Bush's 100 judicial nominees, only 52 have been confirmed; and of the 48 not confirmed, only nine have been granted hearings—at a time when there are 89 vacancies on the federal bench. "The Senate can do much more and must do much more to address the current vacancy crisis," Bush declared last week. "By its inaction, the Senate is endangering the administration of justice."

For their part, Democrats respond that if there is a vacancy crisis, it is the GOP's fault. From 1995 through 2000, when Bill Clinton was in the White House and Republicans controlled the Senate, the Senate confirmed only 35 percent of Clinton's appellate court nominees; by the time Clinton left office the number of appellate court vacancies had more than doubled. Indeed, in confirming 52 of Bush's nominees in one year, the Democratic Senate has already surpassed the number of judicial nominees the Republican Senate confirmed in the last *four* years of the Clinton administration. "President Bush needs to get the facts straight," Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle said in response to Bush's broadside. "The fact is, judicial vacancies dramatically increased under Republican control of the Senate. In less than a year, Democrats have significantly reduced those vacancies." According

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Literacy is the Key to Unlocking Potential

Kurt M. Landgraf, President & CEO of Educational Testing Service

The importance of literacy to our citizens and our society is too great to ignore. Consider the words of Cheryl James-Ward, Principal of Jane Addams Elementary School in Long Beach, California: "The number of jail cells that we need in the future is determined by the number of kids who aren't reading at the end of the third grade."

It's a sobering thought, and underscoring Dr. Ward's contention are the main findings of a recent report by ETS's Center for Global Assessment, *The Twin Challenges of Mediocrity and Inequality: Literacy in the U.S. from an International Perspective.* First, our average scores on literacy assessments are quite modest. In comparison with such high-income nations as Canada, Germany, Great Britain, and Sweden, the U.S. ranks 12th out of 20. Second, the general mediocrity of U.S. adult literacy skills is accompanied by high inequality in the distribution of skills. This, unfortunately, makes America an international leader in the gap between the most and least literate segments of each country's population.

America's literacy gap is a disgrace. Raising our nation's literacy performance beyond its present mediocre level and reducing the levels of inequality is not just a question of spending more money, although dollars can certainly help. Those of us engaged in the educational enterprise must also cut waste, retarget available resources, and revamp the rules and rewards of the education and labor market systems.

The *Twin Challenges* authors also point out that we need to think of more creative ways to provide incentives for parents, students, workers, schools, and employers who want to change the status quo and to create and continue offering opportunities and rewards for those who want to succeed. Everyone has a stake in the outcome of this struggle, and therefore everyone has a responsibility to do his or her part in achieving success.

"Understanding the importance of literacy is critical to our nation's educational, economic, and social health."

The report authors state that we cannot just focus on the literacy of our students. Any unemployed or low-income working adult with limited skills should be eligible for funding that covers instruction as well as some sort of financial incentive for demonstrating gains in skills.

Understanding the importance of literacy is critical to our nation's educational, economic, and social health. Achieving literacy is the key to unlocking our possibilities and to opening the door of opportunity and dignity to tens of millions of Americans. The alternative is to continue building more jails and putting our human potential and promise behind bars. That's the choice, and now is the time to decide.

ETS *Educational Testing Service*

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to *Roll Call*, Democrats, trying to make May 9 their own special day, have scheduled hearings for that morning on the "egregious treatment of Clinton nominees."

The fight over judicial nominees is one of those nasty spats that beg for a high-minded solution. As *The Washington Post*'s Ceci Connolly recently lamented on FOX NEWS, "The problem is, OK, after we agree a pox on both households, how do you break ... this stalemate?" One answer that has grown increasingly popular among the commentariat is for Democrats to at least grant hearings to Bush's nominees—even if they eventually vote against them. While empathizing with Democratic objections to some of Bush's more ideologically extreme nominees, a March editorial in *The New York Times* called on Senate Democrats to stop dragging their feet and to arrange "for an up-or-down vote in the Judiciary Committee." As the *Los Angeles Times*' Ronald Brownstein recently argued, senators should be "require[d] ... to cast a recorded vote to block a president's selection.... Even judges should be guaranteed their day in court."

Which sounds fair enough. After all, it hardly seems right for Democrats to thwart Bush's judicial nominees simply by stalling. But, in fact, the up-or-down vote solution is no solution at all—unless you're resigned to letting a president, elected with a minority of the popular vote, shift the judiciary substantially to the right. Politically, once you grant hearings, you *have* to vote yes the vast majority of the time. The ugly truth is that the only practical way to stop Bush from stocking the courts with his ideological kin is to stall. Procedurally, that's nothing to be proud of. But it worked for the Republicans in the 1990s. And today it's the only viable strategy Democrats have.

THE FUNDAMENTAL FLAW in the up-or-down vote solution is its assumption that voting down judicial nominees is easy. In fact, it's hard to do even once and impossible to do as a matter of course. Just consider the recent case of Charles Pickering, the Mississippi federal district court judge Bush wanted to bump up to the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals. Pickering was an understandable target for Democrats: an arch-conservative with a not-too-distinguished track record and a good friend of Mississippi Senator Trent Lott—the man who personally blocked three of Clinton's nominees to the same court. What's more, Pickering was a right-wing Southerner with an ambiguous personal history on race. It didn't take much for Democrats and their liberal interest-group allies to paint him as a racist—which, in crude (and shameful) fashion, they did. In the end, Pickering was defeated on a straight party-line vote of ten to nine.

But defeating Pickering came with a price. First, the Pickering hearings created a poisonous atmosphere on the Hill. The cordial relations between Daschle and Lott, which the two had enjoyed ever since 9/11, became almost instantly bitter as Lott sought revenge by blocking the appointment of a top Daschle aide to a seat on the Federal Communications Commission. Lott also used Senate rules to shut down meetings of three Senate committees, and he tried to block money appropriated to the Judiciary Committee for anti-terrorism oversight.

Even worse for Democrats—particularly those running for reelection this November—was the political fallout. As Georgia Democratic Senator Zell Miller, who supported Pickering, said, his defeat will "make it even more difficult for Democratic candidates to be successful in the South." And sure enough, Republican Senate candidates like John Cornyn in Texas and Lamar Alexander in Tennessee are making judges an issue. ("President Bush was right about Judge Pickering," Alexander declared in one of his campaign's first radio ads.) What's more, Republicans are already threatening that if John Edwards runs for president, they'll use the North Carolina senator's anti-Pickering vote—and his relentless questioning of Pickering during his hearing—to portray him as a liberal tool of left-wing interest groups.

All of which makes it unlikely Senate Democrats will be willing to endure many more Pickeringesque fights in the future (except, of course, when it comes to the Supreme Court). Indeed, were Democrats to grant every Bush nominee a hearing and an up-or-down vote, it seems likely most of the votes would be up: While Democrats have given the green light to 52 of Bush's judicial nominees, Pickering is the only one they have actually voted down.

On the other hand, the political consequences of stalling seem relatively minor. Just consider how brilliantly the strategy worked for the Republicans during the Clinton administration: Of the 24 Clinton appellate court nominees the GOP defeated, not one was ever allowed a public vote. Much as Republicans are doing today, Democrats back then tried to make an issue out of the delays and the vacancy crisis they were causing. "The Republicans are holding up judgeships—causing extraordinary delay of justice in many parts of our country because we don't have judges," Daschle complained in 1997. But when voters went to the polls, they didn't seem to care—returning Republican majorities to the Senate. Indeed, the only Republican senator who seemed to suffer at the polls because of his opposition to a judicial nominee was Missouri Senator John Ashcroft. That's because Ashcroft had the bad sense to torpedo the nomination of a black judge named Ronnie White *after* White had his hearing and was up for a vote. Black turnout in Missouri more than doubled in November 2000—a major reason Ashcroft lost. The lesson, ironically, is that senators take more heat for obstructionism when they give nominees a hearing and then oppose them than when they are truly obstructionist and hold no hearings at all.

So is there a solution to the judicial nominee impasse? Yes, and it's called a compromise. As some Democrats on the Hill are suggesting (and as the *Los Angeles Times*' Brownstein proposed, in addition to the up-or-down vote solution), Democrats should offer hearings (and yes votes) to the Bush nominees they deem acceptably moderate. In exchange, Bush should scrap his most conservative nominees and replace them with candidates more to the Democrats' liking, including some of the judicial moderates Clinton put forward who never received votes or hearings. This would prevent Republicans from unfairly benefiting from their intransigence during the Clinton years, and it would go a long way toward solving the judicial-vacancy crisis. And it could, in the end, get May 9 off the calendar once and for all. ■

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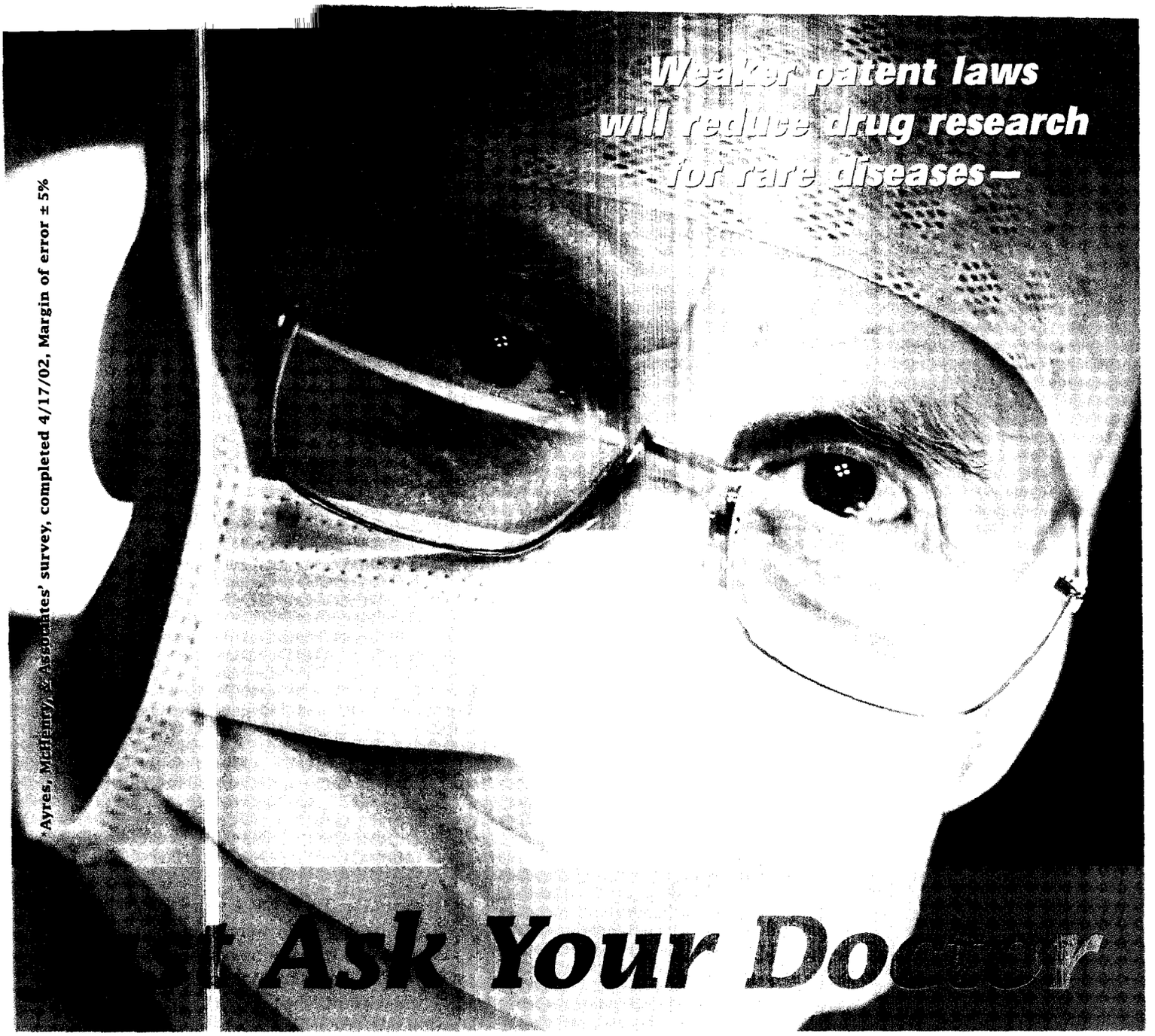

*Ayres, McHenry, & Associates' survey, completed 4/17/02, Margin of error ± 5%

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Why the evening news is worse than "O'Reilly."

Anchor Steam

By Rob Walker

When it looked, for a few days in March, as if ABC might shove aside Ted Koppel and "Nightline" to make way for David Letterman, a predictable storm of hand-wringing ensued: Was network broadcast journalism in jeopardy? Was it simply a matter of time before the evening news itself was sacrificed at the altar of shareholder value?

It wasn't the first time the question has been asked, and it won't be the last. (Indeed, depending on the outcome of Peter Jennings's ongoing contract negotiations—ABC reportedly hopes to persuade him to take a pay cut—it could come up again rather soon.) Defenders of evening-news broadcasts tend to describe them as a redoubt of sobriety and responsibility in a "news environment" dominated by loudmouthed punditry (think Chris Matthews and Bill O'Reilly) and gross sensationalism. And in a sense, critics say much the same thing: that the problem with the nightly news is that it's too dull and dowdy to compete.

Having recently spent three weeks as one of the 25 million or so Americans who watch the networks' flagship broadcasts (a habit that, like many millions of other Americans, I gave up long ago), I have a news flash for both sides: If the network news divisions think they are producing an evening broadcast so noble that it deserves to be defended from the corporate huns, they're kidding themselves. And if the evening news isn't dramatic enough for those corporate honchos, it's not for lack of trying. It's not just the much-noted increase in "soft" news features that now eats up a large portion of each broadcast; even the hard news now comes with a hard sell in which emotional impact trumps intellectual content with appalling consistency. The evening anchors may still look and talk like paragons of wisdom and integrity right out of our nostalgia-clouded memory of The Good Old Days, but their broadcasts are something else. Or as they might put it, "Shameless hype. Trumped-up melodrama. It pretends. To be a public service. But just how dumb is *your* evening news?"

Each half-hour network-news broadcast contains about 17 total minutes of news, once you subtract the commercials and the endless "teases." All begin with a straightforward nine or ten minutes of reasonable, if sketchy, summaries of major events. My first week of viewing was devoted to ABC's "World News Tonight" with Peter Jennings. The program opens with the "ba-ba-BA-ba" fanfare familiar to anyone who owns a TV set. As a sequence of images flashes across the screen, Jennings calls out the day's headlines in the form of fragmentary phrases—"Casualties," "Left Uncovered," "Mass Destruction," "Utter Confusion." ("That would be the tax code," Jennings adds in reference to the last phrase, using the peculiar stop-start locution style that's de rigueur in TV news: "Two hundred pages. Just. To describe a child.") The point seems to be to make everything sound as momentous, titillating, and potentially enraging as possible.

Jennings sits behind a desk in what appears to be an actual newsroom. The lead story my first night was the latest from eastern Afghanistan, where American soldiers were battling Al Qaeda forces. A quick clip of historian Michael Beschloss—one of those "experts" forever being trotted out to give a learned gloss to some obvious point—showed him sagely observing that if the public gets upset about casualties, a prolonged military effort will be hard to sustain. This was followed by an extraordinary series of sound and image bites from relatives of the handful of soldiers killed in the fighting, each relative tearily resolute that the country is doing the right thing. "It is an excruciating, extraordinary price they pay," summarized reporter Dan Harris. "They say it's worth it."

They say it's worth it. There was a weird ambivalence to Harris's tone. Did he think they were lying? Being naïve? I heard this tone a lot on the evening news, and I finally figured out that it didn't mean anything specific—the ambivalence was the whole point. The tone suggested *something* is amiss, but left it up to me to decide what it might be. To the extent I saw bias on the evening news, it wasn't ideological; it was a bias toward the ambiguously melodramatic. They say it's worth it—*but is it really?* Stay tuned.

Once we're off the day's headlines, there are seven or eight minutes for "feature" or "enterprise" reporting—getting beyond the bland recap that a viewer could have gotten from CNN Headline News. After Letterman decided to stay at CBS, ABC News President David Westin reportedly told his troops that they could prove their worth to parent company Disney by way of "innovative and bold" fare; presumably the second half of the evening news is one place to do it.

Every night ABC runs a segment called "A Closer Look," which is usually a two- or three-minute report on something that's not in the headlines at all. These tend to be CliffsNotes versions of stories that might appear on a "magazine"-style show, but they are severely truncated and lacking any particular point of view (even a banal one like, "Taxes are too complicated"). Sentencing laws in Louisiana, buying prescription drugs from Canada via the Internet, adoption agen-

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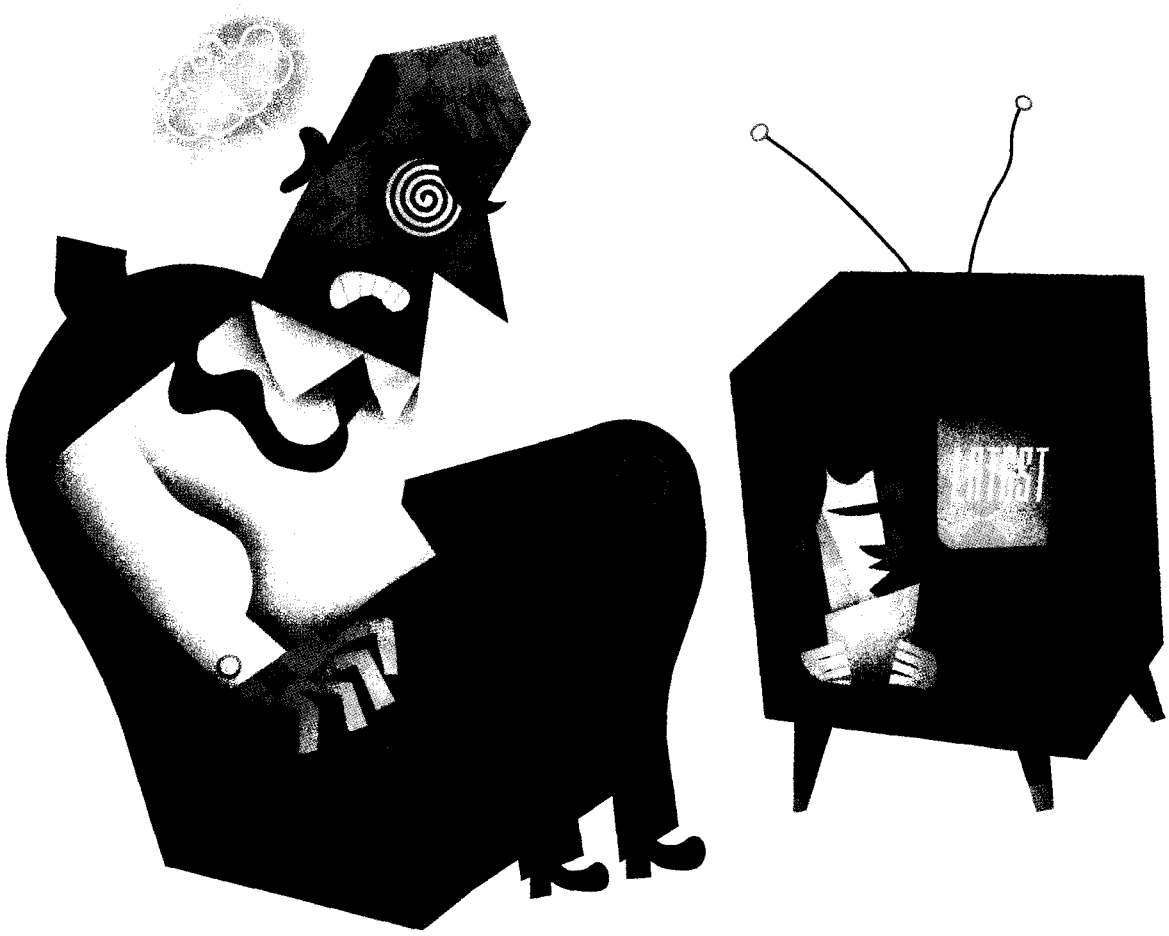

cies "putting a premium on race." Good? Bad? Who knows? The topics seem to be selected—and crafted—not so much to inform viewers as to fire up a half-baked opinion in every kitchen. You can be outraged about how draconian the sentencing laws are—or about the prospect of criminals going free. You can be upset that the Internet makes it easy to cheat the health care system—or you can rail against price-gouging drug companies. You might be appalled that adoption agencies make it more expensive to adopt a white child—or distraught that race-specific demand from potential parents has created this "marketplace."

One of television's advantages over print is, of course, the power of actual footage. But often this seems to be the tail that wags the dog. One evening Jennings introduced the post-headlines segment by saying, "The Senate Judiciary Committee today agreed to delay the vote on a controversial White House nomination to a federal court." He showed a clip of Senators Orrin Hatch and Patrick Leahy quietly bickering at the hearing. "The question is," Jennings said, "do they or do they not know their microphones are not open?" The back-and-forth between Leahy and Hatch lasted about a minute, and then Jennings repeated his question: "Did they or did they not know their microphones were open?" Here are some other questions: Who was the nominee? For what court? What's the controversy? The clip shed no light on any of this, and neither did Jennings. (It was Thomas Pickering, nominated for the Fifth Circuit, who was at the center of a tussle over his civil rights record.) This segment, too, seemed designed to elicit a kind of content-free outrage: Viewers should be angry at all this pointless bickering between senators—and it must be pointless, given that the broadcast never explained what it was about.

Finally ABC has a closing feature. Sometimes this slot is filled by Mike Lee, a reporter who has been "traveling around the world, on his own, picking up stories," as part of a series called "The Road To Anywhere." His dispatches get nearly three minutes. I saw two. One found Lee on a South African beach, reporting on a black youth who surfs. ("A young man, full of hope and promise," Lee explained helpfully.) In another, we visited a game reserve, also in South Africa, where one can have plastic surgery. "It's called a surgery safari," Lee noted, before claiming that it is "one of South Africa's fastest-growing attractions." (News veterans know that even if a trend is tiny and inconsequential, it can almost always be described as "fast-growing.")

But easily the best news feature I saw in my week of watching ABC was a tie-in to the release of the film *Time Machine*, based on the H.G. Wells novel. ABC Correspondent Robert Krulwich used the occasion to inform us that ... time travel is possible! "This can be done?" he asked, all agog. "How?" The explanation came from a professor who managed to explain basic principles of physics as though they were breaking news: If you are moving fast enough, near the speed of light, for instance, you will travel "into the future." (Didn't we learn this in high school?) To drive home the remedial science lesson, we were shown footage of 1970s experiments that confirmed Albert Einstein's theories on this subject, followed by clips from the 1985 movie *Back to the Future*. Krul-

DAVID COWLES

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wich summed up: "So while it's theoretically possible to leap into the future, unlike Michael J. Fox, we don't have the vehicle, the fuel, or the know-how to do this—yet."

There's "innovative and bold" news for you.

UNLIKE PETER JENNINGS, Tom Brokaw delivers the news standing, right out there in the open, in front of a floating video screen and a high-tech backdrop. It's as if he's speaking to us from a starship, or perhaps from the future itself. *Energy* is what NBC's "Nightly News" strives to deliver: Brokaw's on-camera persona is spiked with pep. He doesn't smile, of course, but he does emote.

After its standard-issue opening rundown of the day's events, the broadcast usually included at least one "hard news" feature. One night we got a John Hockenberry "exclusive report" about a Saudi fund-raiser for Al Qaeda. At least that's how the piece was billed. NBC got a name from a Federal Bureau of Investigation list, and with "a few simple phone calls" arranged a meeting with the man in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The man in question "denies the charges," said he is not worried, and added that he believes "my government, my people, stand with me."

Hockenberry wasn't deterred. "So your government is protecting you?" he demanded. The question didn't make a lot of sense. Obviously, the guy didn't believe he needed to be "protected" by his government, since Hockenberry *has just told us* that he "denies the charges." The man's response—"Yes, of course"—only confirmed that there wasn't much actual communication occurring. The man's assets had been frozen, however, and in a for-the-cameras moment, Hockenberry accompanied him to an ATM. "It ate your card!" he exclaimed after the ATM ate the man's card. Later, however, another card worked just fine at a nearby café—and Hockenberry enjoyed coffee purchased with alleged Saudi blood money! Hockenberry concluded the piece by observing that the man had "little reason to worry." Should you be upset that he's getting away with it? Or upset that an innocent man is being persecuted? Who knows? Just be upset.

To this end, NBC has a recurring segment called "The Fleecing of America," a regular exercise (they did it twice during the week I watched) in spoon-feeding viewers a big dose of phony outrage. One night we were informed that Pentagon employees have been abusing their official credit cards, racking up $9 billion per year in personal charges. One guy used his card to pay $4,000 for breast implants for his girlfriend. Later in the report we learned that "he eventually paid the money back"—which would seem to indicate that in this instance, at least, America was not fleeced. Even so, Lisa Myers told us, the Pentagon has lost "tens of millions in tax dollars." It's a perfect issue for viewers to complain about at the dinner table—everyone can agree it's lousy, regardless of whether they think we should be spending more money on the military or less. In another "Fleecing" installment, we met a woman who had been "scammed" by a telemarketer into paying $64 per month for a slew of magazine subscriptions she couldn't afford. How big a problem is this? Don't expect an answer to such questions—just get mad at those shady fleecers.

NBC also devotes a big chunk of its feature time to lifestyle-oriented stories. There was health "news" almost every night (e.g., a nation of people sitting in front of the television is warned of the "stunning" results of a new study showing it's "dangerous ... to be sedentary"). Often the soft news gets a vigorous sell job to make it sound hard. One night Brian Williams, sitting in for Brokaw, relentlessly teased a story with variations on the question "Guess who's moving to the suburbs?" By the end of the broadcast I was on the edge of my seat. The answer: single people. "What does it mean for your family?" Williams asked, stumping me. Another report told of women learning to fish so they could better network in the corporate world. There was some incredibly embarrassing footage of women dancing with fish poles, before reporter Anne Thompson deadpanned that they are "aimed at hooking a big deal. On land."

Finally, there was an installment in "our special series, 'Smart Money.'" The teases promised we would learn "how to avoid a rude financial awakening when it comes time for you to retire." Reporter Chip Reid introduced us to a couple who had planned to retire at age 58, but since their stock portfolio had lately been creamed, they'll have to push back their horizons by three or four years. So how could we, the viewers, avoid this awful fate? An expert from something called Resource Securities Corp. gave what Reid himself called the "standard advice"—reduce expenses, diversify your investments, etc. Apparently at a dead end, the report abruptly shifted gears and cited a survey showing that many Americans plan to work part-time even after they retire—a trend that doesn't sound very useful to those of us looking to "avoid a rude financial awakening." Two and a half successfully padded minutes having elapsed, we returned to Brokaw. "For more on planning your retirement, you can log onto MSNBC dot-com," he instructed. Later that evening, I did. There was nothing on the home page about retirement. Not even the "standard advice."

THE "CBS EVENING NEWS" is presided over by Dan Rather, our most iconic anchorman—and our most misunderstood. He is 71 and is often described as the keeper of the tradition of fatherly gravitas that extends back to Walter Cronkite and Edward R. Murrow. In fact, Rather is the most human of the Big Three's Big Three: the one most likely to act like a hothead, spout a bizarre stream of homespun ad-libs, or shed tears on Letterman's show. Far from being the last of the reserved, Olympian anchormen, his rise was an early harbinger of the let-it-all-out style of cable news. And his efforts to keep his passions in check for the sake of a mythical legacy—to speak for everyone while clinging to an accent that reminds us he is an actual guy who actually grew up somewhere, as opposed to having been concocted in some network laboratory—only serve to make him more fascinating. He may be the only person working in TV news who could someday be the subject of a great biography.

Rather—who seems to be seated at the start of the broadcast but at other times is apparently standing—strikes an explicitly populist note. He doesn't refer to "the government"; he refers to "your government." One night, for

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instance, Rather led off with a story on a temporary shutdown of La Guardia Airport following a security breach. "American air travelers going nowhere fast," he accused. "Thousands of U.S. air travelers were delayed, confused, and frightened today by the latest bungle in airport security.... What's going on here? And what, if anything, is your government doing about it?" The answer, of course, was ambiguous. Bob Orr reported the government's explanation that increased concern about terrorism caused such delays and that "they'd rather overreact than take a risk." Yet Orr's delivery (not to mention Rather's setup) managed to make this argument sound vaguely outrageous. The message was reinforced a few days later in a segment by reporter Jim Axelrod concerning a "new" report on airport security. Following incendiary quotes from a grandstanding congressman and an industry gadfly, Axelrod barked, "How do the people running the federal agency in charge of airport security respond? They *don't. Declining* our request for an interview." As his story wound toward the end of its two and a half minutes, Axelrod noted that, "to be fair," the report in question actually predated sweeping changes in airport security (including which federal agency oversees it), and he passed along the White House view that things are improving. But he wrapped up with a slam anyway: "With a performance like the one seen directly after September eleventh, it would seem there's only one way to go." Was this evidence that Axelrod is biased against the Bush administration? No. It was evidence that he's biased in favor of convincing his viewers that people in government don't really care if you sit around at the airport for hours on end.

CBS DID DO less of the "lighter style" nonsense found on ABC and NBC. And it ran the single most ambitious segment I saw on any network in my three weeks of viewing: a genuinely provocative four-minute report on Americans illegally smuggling drugs into South Africa to combat HIV. But even at CBS, hype often triumphed over coherence. One segment, for instance, focused on the "scorching" housing market. On the one hand, realtors in California were quoted—enthusiastically calling housing the "bedrock" of the economy. On the other, reporter Vince Gonzalez said, "Amid all the optimism, some experts are starting to worry about an economy that may depend *too much* on robust housing sales. A housing bubble, they say, is bound to burst, toppling consumer confidence." Cut to Robert Schiller, the economist who made a name with his book *Irrational Exuberance*, on why markets behave erratically. "The danger," he said, "is that we'll see price declines—and the price declines will harm the economy because people ... will cut back their spending."

Gonzalez: "But economist Kenneth Rosen says the Fed wouldn't just stand by and let it happen." Cut to Rosen, who noted, "That requires a very deep recession and high interest rates at the same time, and I don't think that's likely." Gonzalez wrapped the segment up with a burst of semi-sentences: "But what *is* likely. Is continued spending by homeowners and buyers. As long as interest rates. Stay at a forty-year low."

There was really no way to follow this story unless you already knew the subject. Taken at face value, Schiller's quote made no sense—why would people spend less if prices fell? If you were familiar with his thinking, you could fill in the blanks and deduce that he meant that if housing prices collapsed, homeowners would spend less because their net worth would have fallen along with the value of their property. As for Rosen, I doubt he meant to suggest that "the Fed wouldn't just stand by and let it happen" in quite the sense those words convey. He meant that if housing prices fell off a cliff at some unspecified point in the future, the Federal Open Market Committee would lower the Fed Funds rate on the theory that lower rates would jump-start home sales. Gonzalez's summary made it sound as if the Fed might organize a bailout or otherwise intervene in the real estate market, which is not likely. In any case, theorizing about how the United States might recover from a housing bust is necessarily abstract when, as Gonzalez pointed out, rates are low and housing sales are brisk. Of course, if you understood all this to begin with, you hardly needed to see this report. And if you didn't, you may have picked up just enough to be worried that something was wrong, but far from enough to have any idea what it might be.

SO WHAT DID I learn in three weeks of watching the evening news? Basically that the network news, which defends itself against detractors by invoking the earnest sobriety of its broadcasts, contains as much hype and fake populism as any of its cable competitors. In fact, in some ways it's actually worse. As distasteful as the cable shout fests can be, they generally assume that their viewers can handle a detailed discussion, conflicting views, and lengthy segments on a particular issue. The sad truth is that you're a lot more likely to hear something you didn't know—say, just what it was Senators Hatch and Leahy were arguing about during the Pickering hearing—in a spirited debate on "Hardball" than on the evening news. O'Reilly and Matthews (and the hosts of "Crossfire," and on and on) may be peddling outrage, but at least it has some political content; if viewers get mad while watching these shows, they probably at least know what it is they're mad about.

The evening news, by contrast, treats its viewers like angry, gullible ignoramuses. And that's particularly frustrating when you consider that the network news divisions are not threadbare operations: They employ packs of extremely highly paid journalists. ABC News, for example, employs not just Jennings and Koppel, but also Diane Sawyer, Barbara Walters, John Stossel, Sam Donaldson, George Stephanopoulos, Cokie Roberts, and John Miller—most of whom pull down a salary that the most talented print journalist in the United States will never, ever attain. Nor is the problem the limitations of the medium. Broadcast journalism can have, and occasionally does have, extraordinary power. In the weeks after September 11 all three networks did a good job: Their coverage was sober, thoughtful, and responded rapidly to a singularly unpredictable event in a way that was not only competent but somehow reassuring. But once we got through the immediate aftermath of the attack and the war in Afghanistan, all these highly paid journalists went back to using their highly useful medium to tell us about a black youth who surfs and women who fish.

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'We People of Faith Stand Firmly With Israel'

By Ralph Reed*

This past week Israel marked the 54th anniversary of its birth with ceremonies filled more with solemnity than celebration. And yet for Israelis there is always hope in the very fact of survival. For many, there is no greater proof of God's sovereignty in the world today than the survival of the Jews and the existence of Israel.

This truth explains in part why Christians and other conservative people of faith stand so firmly in their support of Israel. But, as it turns out, that is only part of the story, and the fuller explanation is more complex and interesting.

The evangelical movement swept the U.S. during the 19th century, building robust denominations and projecting evangelical social values, while simultaneously spawning social reform movements for temperance, anti-slavery, settlement houses and orphanages. Throughout this period, reconstituting a modern Jewish state remained a remote concern at best, and sojourns to the Holy Land by American Christians were rare. Following World War II and the shocking revelations of the Holocaust, all this changed. Christians joined the humanitarian impulse to support the creation of Israel out of the British mandate in the Middle East. Few could deny that such a state was a moral imperative in a world whose lexicon now included names like Auschwitz and Dachau. Stigmatized by historical anti-Semitism in Europe, renounced as "killers of Christ" by the medieval church, haunted by the hoofbeats and horrors of the Russian pogroms, hunted down by Hitler's Gestapo and shipped to death camps, the Jews who sought refuge in the modern state of Israel needed no theoretical argument for a homeland of their own.

Christians, meanwhile, saw support for Israel through the prism of a proud tradition that included Corrie ten Boom and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who sacrificed their own lives while resisting Nazi tyranny and protecting Jews from the Holocaust. The depth of such feeling in the Christian community is difficult to overestimate.

I recall as a child my mother participating in a Methodist Bible study in which she read the works of Bonhoeffer and other Christians who resisted Hitler, passing on a formative lesson that standing up for my faith meant defending the right of Jews to practice theirs.

During the Cold War, this humanitarian impulse became inextricably linked with geopolitical reality. As some Arab states allied themselves with the Soviet Union, the Middle East stood at a crucial crossroads in the larger global struggle between communism and democratic capitalism. Outnumbered and outflanked by the armies of Arab neighbors — many armed with Soviet weaponry — Israel bravely stood alone in a region that had known military conflict for centuries.

This is still true today. Israel is the only genuine democracy in the region and remains one of the most reliable allies of the United States. The shared democratic values and common strategic interests of Israel and the U.S. have engendered a deep bond that transcends the domestic politics of either nation and survives the triumph and tragedy of diplomacy.

President Bush's Middle East policy embodies this bond. He has condemned the inhumanity of terrorism, called Yasser Arafat to task for his failure to contain terrorism and decried the use of violence by both sides. It is unlikely that Bush's policy will alienate religious conservatives, as they are sophisticated enough to recognize that the president's own moral impulse is balanced by the demands of statecraft.

Finally, support for Israel derives from the simple fact that its land was cradle of both Judaism and Christianity. Prior to 1967 when Israel gained control of East Jerusalem, access to Jewish and Christian holy sites in the old city was difficult. Regardless of one's eschatology — and there are as many theological strains as denominations — there is an undeniable and powerful spiritual connection between Israel and the Christian faith. It is where Jesus was born and where he conducted his ministry.

I still recall my first visit to Israel, when I awoke at dawn in my hotel and walked out on the balcony to watch the sun rise over the ruins of the ancient temple of Jerusalem. At that moment, I saw Israel's struggle for what it should be for all the world's citizens — a struggle to maintain free and open access to the holy sites of the world's faiths, a struggle to build a beacon of democracy and hope in a region that has for too long known bloodshed and hatred.

At this moment, that hope is greatly challenged. But as Golda Meir once remarked, "Pessimism is a luxury that a Jew can never allow himself. May I say more broadly, today pessimism is a luxury none of us can afford."

Meir rejected pessimism, and so must we. Her optimism — the touchstone of her faith — can bind Christians and Jews together when the world's events seem to counsel futility, not only in opposing terrorism, but in building a better world for future generations.

*Ralph Reed is chairman of the Georgia Republican Party and served as a senior advisor to the Bush campaign. His article appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* on April 21, 2002, and has been brought to you as a public service by ADL.

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If the suits who run the network news divisions believe that this use of their de facto front page serves the public interest, it's time someone called their bluff. The theory, after all, is that in exchange for paying nothing at all for incredibly valuable public airwaves, the networks "give back" by providing solid news. But what today's network-news broadcasts "give back" to the public is barely worth getting. Society would probably be better off if the Big Three junked them altogether, abandoned the fiction that they were serving the public interest, and simply paid the government fair market value for the airwaves.

Defenders of the evening news like to point out that even today, those broadcasts draw a cumulative audience that dwarfs that of the cable-news networks—some 25 million nightly viewers, compared with less than three million for CNN, FOX NEWS, and MSNBC combined. The usual rejoinder is that whatever its size, the network-news audience is in steady decline. That's a fine point, but I have a different one, which is: What a waste! To the extent the evening news still draws us to a sort of national campfire, what it chooses to tell us once we're gathered there is that those clueless senators were bickering again about something or other, and we have the footage to prove it. When I started my three-week project, I was interested in how the evening news might save itself. By the end, I was asking a different question: Why bother? ■

John Rendon's shallow p.r. war on terrorism.

Flacks Americana

By FRANKLIN FOER

IT'S FIVE MILES from Northern Virginia, where the Pentagon sets military targets, and a mile and a half from Foggy Bottom, where the State Department cobbles together coalitions. To look at it, you'd never guess that the ten-story glass-and-steel building at the intersection of Connecticut Avenue and T Street, nestled amid the town houses and cafés of Dupont Circle, serves as one of the headquarters for the U.S. propaganda war against terrorism. If it doesn't look like a government office building, that's because it's not. Rather, it houses a public relations firm called The Rendon Group. It was The Rendon Group that last winter shot down Taliban fictions about captured Chinook choppers and American atrocities in Mazar-e-Sharif. It dispatched operatives to arrange images of Defense Department officials basking in the thanks of the Afghan people. And its mission goes far beyond Central Asia. It monitors Muslim opinion with polls and focus groups, and then it generates plans for influencing it. "Rendon has devised much of the strategy," says one military official about the p.r. war against terrorism.

The firm's head is a rumpled, dough-faced man named John W. Rendon. Since the first Bush administration, he's been on the scene at almost every American military action. During the Panama invasion, he bunkered in a high-rise on Punta Paitilla with the leaders of the anti-Noriega coalition. In the Gulf war, he set up shop in Taif, Saudi Arabia, to spin on behalf of the exiled Kuwaiti emir. Once the war ended, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) hired him to trash Saddam Hussein and to promote the dictator's opponents. Along the way, he's helped make America's case in Haiti, Kosovo, Zimbabwe, and Colombia.

So it's hardly surprising that when September 11 hit, The Rendon Group was already on the Pentagon payroll. And since then its portfolio has expanded dramatically. Last fall and winter Rendon joined a 9:30 call every morning with top-level officials like Karen Hughes and Pentagon spokeswoman Torie Clarke to set the day's war message. He was the only non-government employee in on the discussions. According to one military official who worked with Rendon, "He's pushed for a faster response. His approach demands that we win every news cycle and let no attack go unanswered." A State Department official adds, "Defense has a lot of money to spend. They're keen to use his services and will go along with any idea of his that appears reasonable." Last October, Rendon helped create something called the Coalition Information Center (CIC), whose offices in Washington, London, and Islamabad are manned by professional spinmeisters who immediately respond to enemy propaganda. (Rendon invited CNN's "Crossfire" host Paul Begala to run the Islamabad office; but Begala declined, saying he couldn't leave his family for a long stretch of time.) And in fighting America's propaganda war, Rendon has earned a small fortune. According to two Pentagon sources, The Rendon Group has billed the government at least $7.5 million for its post-9/11 services.

Rendon isn't the only outsider imported to manage America's image: Last spring the State Department hired Charlotte Beers, the advertising brain behind the ad campaigns for Head & Shoulders and Uncle Ben's. But while her hiring garnered far more publicity than Rendon's, she hasn't had nearly as much money to throw around. Thanks to skimpy budgets at State (which hasn't shared the Pentagon's recent bounty), Beers has done little more than produce a few public service announcements, a website (telling people in the Muslim world that the war on terror is not a war against them), and leaflets celebrating "Mosques of America." She's also been hamstrung by Foggy Bottom's cautiousness. Last fall, when Senator Joe Biden proposed a

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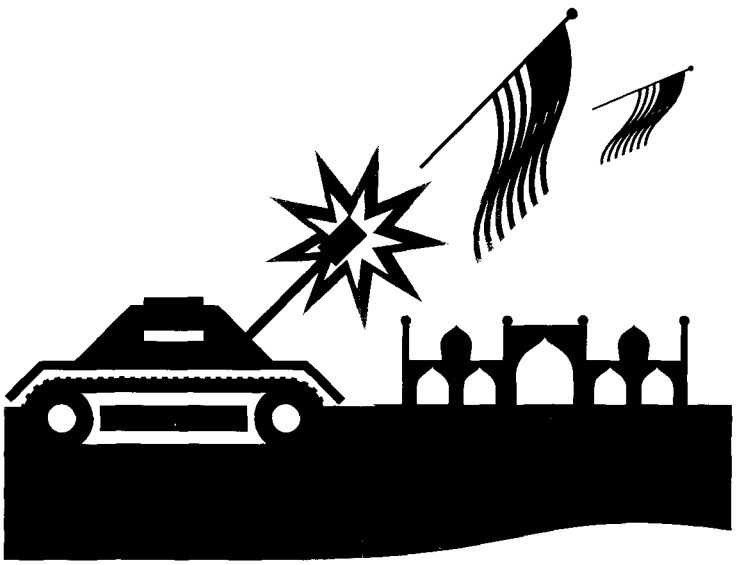
new U.S.-funded Arabic-language satellite channel—an idea Beers liked—her bosses rejected the plan as too grandiose. "Too far, too fast," as one official describes his department's response.

There's a reason the government has turned to media professionals like Rendon and Beers to run its propaganda war: It no longer has anyone in-house to do the job. During the cold war, the CIA did propaganda better than anyone. Spooks at Langley secretly funded Radio Free Europe and the Congress for Cultural Freedom—until *The New York Times* exposed the Agency's operations in 1966 and 1967. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, covert alliances with European trade unions helped stymie communist takeovers of Italy and France. Despite the growth of fellow-traveling intelligentsia, the CIA emboldened Europe's best and brightest—figures like Arthur Koestler, Stephen Spender, and Ignazio Silone—to bash their communist colleagues and expose the horrors of the Soviet system. Left-wing intellectuals published poetry and prose in Agency-funded magazines like *Encounter*, *Der Monat*, and *Les Preuves*. "The cultural cold war stands among the Agency's finest accomplishments," says Pulitzer Prize-winning CIA historian Thomas Powers. "It's not an exaggeration to say that it helped change the course of history."



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But the fall of the Soviet Union also brought about the fall of America's propaganda infrastructure. The State Department's public-diplomacy department took about a 40 percent hit in funding between 1991 and 2001. And the CIA's once-vaunted operation withered. A Pentagon official estimates that the CIA's propaganda operation has dwindled from 225 people to 25 over the last decade. And in the 1990s, as the propaganda war's front line gradually shifted from anti-communism to anti-extremist Islam, the Agency found itself ill prepared. "In the mid-nineties, the guy doing propaganda [for the Middle East] was seventy plus," an ex-agent told me. "He didn't speak Arabic. With him, he had an alcoholic who got fired from the CIA. You're talking about the walking wounded." Fred Hitz, a former inspector general of the CIA, puts it bluntly: "The Agency just doesn't understand the new task."

A few months ago the Pentagon thought it had an answer to this problem: It wanted to create a new propaganda machine to combat radical Islam, carefully modeled on the CIA's cold war successes. But that project, the Office of Strategic Influence (OSI), died last February in a paroxysm of intra-agency squabbling and front-page "revelations" that the Pentagon would conduct "disinformation." And while Rendon had nothing to do with OSI's demise, he was the main beneficiary. The collapse of the Pentagon's in-house propaganda office cleared the field for Rendon and his very different strategy for winning the hearts and minds of the Muslim world.

The Rendon model of propaganda (he prefers phrases such as "information warfare" and "perception management") is in many ways the opposite of the CIA's long-term, ideas-oriented effort. Rendon, who cut his teeth as a political consultant, specializes in exploiting the technology of American campaigns—focus groups, voter databases, rapid-response teams. Through focus groups, for instance, he's learned that among Pakistanis "[t]here exists an ambivalent attitude toward the September eleventh incident" and that his participants "reiterated the theme of Jewish conspiracy." The CIC plots the appearances of American officials on AL-JAZEERA to make sure they appear at strategic, highly watched moments. And it churns out regular press releases and statements that try to hone the day's coverage, responding to charges of torture in Guantanamo Bay or civilian casualties in Afghanistan.

Of course, there's value in shaping news coverage. But Rendon makes a fetish of it, focusing on winning the daily sound-bite battle rather than the war of ideas. He tends to overrate the power of media outlets (in particular AL-JAZEERA, which is about the tenth-largest Arabic broadcaster, behind the London-based Middle Eastern Broadcasting Corporation) and underestimate the deeper sources of anti-Americanism in the Middle East that express themselves in educational curricula and Arab intellectual life. There's a reason, after all, that absurd stories—e.g., that Mossad perpetrated September 11, that Purim pastry is made from the blood of Muslim children—thrive in the Muslim world: They jibe with strongly held, deeply ingrained worldviews. And changing a worldview requires more than a series of press releases or televised interviews with American officials. It requires the gradual cultivation and propagation of an alternative worldview—exactly what the CIA did during the cold war. Rendon's approach, by contrast, can be summed up by his comments in a 1996 speech at the Air Force Academy: "In news, speed is more important than substance.... Getting it first is more important than getting it right, and herein lies a threat." Rendon is half-right; he just has the nature of the threat backward: Our propaganda apparatus has become so obsessed with getting it first that it has ceased to get it right.

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Given Rendon's success at winning contracts from Republican administrations, it's ironic that he got his start in politics as a yellow-dog Democrat. During the 1970s, as a twentysomething McGovernite in Washington, he developed a reputation as a gregarious and skilled logistician. He masterminded Michael Dukakis's gubernatorial campaign in 1974; worked as executive director of the Democratic National Committee in the Jimmy Carter era; managed the 1980 Democratic convention in New York; and subsequently worked as chief scheduler for Carter's reelection campaign. He was well on his way toward a lucrative career in the budding business of political consulting. But even as Rendon acquired top-drawer clients like Senator John Kerry and the AFL-CIO, wanderlust set in. An epicurean fond of wearing berets and military fatigues, Rendon began to crave a life that would liberate him from the biannual repetition of American campaigns. "There's not much to it. In part, he fell into it. In part, he got bored. In about the mid-eighties, he started working races in the Caribbean," says his friend and Democratic strategist Elaine Kamarck.

Rendon's early campaigns abroad resembled Saul Bellow's Henderson, with direct mail, polling, and the rest of the foreigner's technology dazzling the natives. He used lasers to beam the slogan of the Aruba People's Party into the night sky. But Rendon's career took an unlikely turn in Panama, where his work with political opponents of Manuel Noriega kept him in the country straight through the 1989 American invasion. As U.S. forces quickly invaded and quickly pulled out, he helped broker the transition of power. "Both sides"—the American military and the new Panamanian government—"trusted him," says Jeff Eller, a consultant who worked for Rendon on the ground.

In Panama, Rendon befriended a CIA agent named Linda Flohr. The Agency—whose propaganda offices were still populated by Eastern European émigrés focused on the fight against communism—was growing desperate for help managing post-cold-war public relations. Flohr suggested that Rendon make the case against Iraq. In the summer of 1990 the Kuwaiti government hired him to help drum up support for the Gulf war; a few months later the CIA gave Rendon an official contract.

Representing Kuwait wasn't as easy a task as it might sound. Despite Saddam's atrocities, Kuwait's government didn't naturally inspire sympathy. Its playboy elite partied away their exile in fancy hotels and casinos across Europe and the Arab world. To counteract these images, Rendon arranged for Kuwaitis to send 20,000 valentines to American soldiers on the front lines. He also organized a tear-jerking vigil with Kuwaiti exiles in Cairo, intended to gin up sentimental images for the American nightly news broadcasts. In Taif he set up a TV network that beamed morale-boosting programming to the people of occupied Kuwait. His office sent faxes mocking Saddam's son Uday to numbers across Baghdad to buck up the spirits of Hussein's internal critics. And when the Iraqi army finally departed Kuwait City, Rendon handed out American flags for Kuwaitis to wave at the incoming liberators—and the trailing camera crews. Throughout the operation, Rendon enjoyed a virtual free hand. As a representative of the Kuwaiti ministry of information told a reporter, "Money is no problem." And it certainly wasn't a problem for Rendon. Over the course of his service to the Kuwaitis—about seven months—he cleared at least $770,000 in profits.

A few months after the United States rolled the Iraqi army back to Baghdad, George H.W. Bush signed a document called a "finding" that ordered covert operations "to create the conditions for the removal of Saddam Hussein from power." According to journalists Andrew and Patrick Cockburn, when Frank Anderson, the chief of the CIA's Near East division, read it, he scrawled in the margin, "I don't like this." His trepidation was understandable: Only months earlier, the administration had made a conscious decision not to advance on Baghdad. Now, at least on paper, it was trying to topple Saddam. "The Agency wanted to clean their hands of the whole mess," says one ex-intelligence official, "so they gave it to Rendon."

From his office in Washington, Rendon became the de facto leader of the Iraqi opposition. He ran radio networks that broadcast into Iraq, creating an entire playlist of anti-Saddam programming. He produced leaflets, comic books, and other material skewering the dictator. And he didn't just produce material for Iraqi consumption. An "atrocity exhibition" of photojournalism traveled across Europe, rebutting sanctions critics like Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari. From Rendon's offices in central London, reporters could instantly receive stock footage of petroleum-covered birds, burning fields, and other Iraqi atrocities against Kuwait.

But the CIA had also assigned Rendon a far more delicate task: to help organize, advise, and stage-manage the Iraqi opposition. After the Gulf war, there weren't many available anti-Saddam vehicles. Under pressure from Congress, the CIA seized on well-connected, smooth-talking London businessman Ahmad Chalabi and tried to help him unite Shia and Sunnis, Kurds and Arabs, exiles and dissidents, into a popular front called the Iraqi National Congress (INC). Rendon wasn't exactly the brains of the operation—Chalabi ran the group—but he was the man whispering in Chalabi's ear. "The INC was clueless. They needed a lot of help and didn't know where to start. That is why Rendon was brought in," says Thomas Twetten, the CIA's former deputy director of operations. Rendon helped Chalabi choose the group's English name, and he organized an INC conference in Vienna. When INC representatives came to Washington in July 1992 to meet with Brent Scowcroft and James Baker, Rendon advised them on what to say and how to say it. He even assigned them one of the field operatives from Walter Mondale's 1984 presidential bid. "The whole mindset is that you're involved in a campaign," says an ex-Rendon employee. "You've got all the trappings and a similar apparatus."

Rendon's trappings and apparatus cost money. Indeed, throughout his career, he's been dogged by complaints of profligate spending—even charged with being the p.r. equivalent of the Pentagon's $400 toilet seat. In 1995 CIA accountants demanded an audit of his work. As ABC

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reported in 1998, Rendon's own records show he spent more than $23 million in the first year of his contract to work with the INC. Several of his operatives in London earned more than the director of Central Intelligence—about $19,000 per month. Rendon shot across the Atlantic on the Concorde, while his subordinates flew on open business-class tickets. According to one of those subordinates, "There was no incentive for Rendon to hold down costs." While the Agency's inspector general found no fraud, he was outraged at what he deemed Rendon's exploitation of his open-ended contract. Take the videotapes that Rendon sent to media around the world: Because Rendon didn't have production capability in his office, he farmed out the work. And under his contract, he collected a 10 percent management fee for each subcontractor he hired. In the course of making the video he also received 10 percent of the cost of buying the tapes, hiring a camera crew, and renting an editing suite. On top of that pure profit, he billed for his own operatives who put the tape together. Finally, he sold the finished tape to the government at a rate of $5,000 per minute.

AND THE COMPLAINTS had as much to do with the quality of Rendon's work as the cost. According to CIA agents who worked with Rendon on the INC, his Langley bosses simply didn't monitor his work. "They were broadcasting into Iraq," says one, "but there was no due diligence. Only the Israelis were listening." If the Americans had paid attention, they would have discovered a distinctly mediocre product. "The scripts were put together by twenty-three-year-olds with connections to the Democratic National Committee," says the ex-Rendon employee. "They didn't have any experience, let alone in Iraq. And they had every incentive to churn these things out. They were getting paid somewhere between twenty-five and fifty dollars per script. They were rewritten Reuters feeds." Or as the CIA official put it, "Very poor quality. They talked about gassing of the Kurds—but most Iraqis *supported* that. There were all these ineffectual insults. It was like, 'Saddam has a funny mustache.'" Moreover, according to the ex-Rendon employee, when the scripts were recorded in Arabic in a Boston studio, Rendon's announcers spoke with Egyptian and Jordanian accents that weren't entirely comprehensible to an Iraqi audience.

And Rendon, who doesn't speak Arabic, displayed his cultural naïveté in other ways as well. A CIA operative describes Rendon's work with a "radical Shia group—suicide-bomber types—who wanted to have a conference. The guys are in robes and beards. [Rendon] sent a thirty-one-year-old woman with a dress up to her ass who said 'I'm here to plan.'" A comedy of cross-cultural misunderstandings ensued. "They felt insulted by her sheer ignorance," says the agent. While The Rendon Group planned the conference for a Sheraton hotel in Germany, they hadn't considered the difficulties the radicals would have obtaining visas. In the end, the conference never came off.

Gradually, the complaints took their toll. After the first year of Rendon's contract, the CIA depended on him less and less. By 1995 a new team in charge of the CIA's Iraqi Operations Group had severed the Agency's relationship with Rendon altogether. But Rendon simply refocused on the Pentagon—winning contracts in the mid-'90s to help spin the Balkan wars. He is, after all, nothing if not superbly networked. When Flohr left the CIA, for example, she took a job with The Rendon Group. Now she's back in the National Security Council (NSC), where she's deputy to the head of counterterrorism, Wayne Downing. Rendon has also grown close to Karl Rove, even briefing the NSC and White House communications office at his behest. "He's developed a niche," says his friend and international political consultant Joel McCleary. "Nobody else does what he does. Nobody else has mastered the complexities of government contracting or knows the people with power. He's all alone."

RENDON WON'T TALK about his work. In an e-mail, he told me, "In order to honor our commitments to our clients, I am not able, at this time, to discuss in any detail the work performed for them by [The Rendon Group]. Suffice it to say, we are a support function to the decision-makers in the Bush Administration and the implementors/warriors at the Department of Defense." He can admit this much because it is public record. *The New York Times* made Rendon's current Pentagon contract public on February 19. But the article's real scoop was the discovery of what was, briefly, the chief alternative to Rendon's propaganda operation: the Pentagon's Orwellian-sounding Office of Strategic Influence (OSI). According to the *Times*, OSI was to be the center of a disinformation campaign. A senior official told the paper, "When I get their briefings, it's scary." In the days following the story, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld repeatedly denied that any disinformation operation actually existed. But he couldn't persuade a skeptical press corps. Within a week of the *Times* article, the bad publicity had became too much for the Defense Department to bear. On February 26 Rumsfeld announced that the "office has clearly been so damaged that it is pretty clear to me that it could not function effectively. So it is being closed down."

The irony is that the OSI really wasn't planning any disinformation campaign. Even before the *Times* story broke, the Pentagon's general counsel, William Haynes, had begun a standard review of the office's work. And as the controversy intensified, he scoured hard drives and about 11,000 pages of documents, searching for evidence of a "disinformation" strategy. According to a confidential letter that Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith sent to Senator Carl Levin, chairman of the Armed Services Committee, last month, the lawyers found nothing damning: "None of these proposals mentions the word 'disinformation'"—except in the context of countering enemy disinformation. While OSI brainstorming sessions had proposed new methods for misleading the enemy prior to an attack—like Allied head-fakes before the invasion of Normandy—"none of these references to deception involved provision of false information to the public or news media."

The OSI's real purpose—as conceived of by Feith in the weeks after September 11—was to adapt the CIA's old cold war approach to the Middle East. Although the office lived for only about four months, its mission had already begun to

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emerge; OSI would address the root ideological cause of terrorism: In many parts of the Muslim world, no religious or political movement posed a serious challenge to the hegemony of radical and Wahhabist strains of Islam. To foster an alternative, the OSI wanted to help amplify the arguments of moderate Muslims, the same way the CIA had bolstered the left-wing anti-communists. Just as the American government had originally published and disseminated *The God that Failed*, a collection of critiques of communism from such luminaries as André Gide and Richard Wright, OSI would fund the translation of American works into Arabic. It discussed printing textbooks for learning English that depicted the West in a more favorable light—as opposed to the old Soviet-era primers now used in Central Asia. To hash out ideas, the office's head, Peter Worden, scheduled meetings with academics, including a November brainstorming session at The Army and Navy Club with Princeton Professor Bernard Lewis and other Islamic specialists. "They focused on the long term," says Carnes Lord, a professor at the Naval War College with ties to the Pentagon. "They realized that radical Islam won't quickly collapse."

OSI's first project was particularly bold: to shatter the prestige of the approximately 20,000 Pakistani *madrassas*. As part of a package presented to President Pervez Musharraf during his February visit to Washington, Worden arranged for the shipment of millions of dollars' worth of computers, as well as funds, to develop an alternative curriculum for the *madrassas*. To supplement and even supplant the religious schools, the Internet would be used for direct-learning classes, including English and instruction in Islam that lacked a radical, anti-American slant. It would all be arranged by the Pakistani education ministry, with the OSI looking over their shoulder. Musharraf was enthusiastic about the project and arranged for his deputies to discuss it further with Worden. Unfortunately, the program's fate remains undecided. Two weeks after Bush presented the program to Musharraf, OSI was dead.

The cause of that death is an open secret, even if it's only been publicly reported in the conservative magazine *Insight*. "Clarke killed it," one Pentagon beat reporter told me. That would be Torie Clarke, the Pentagon's chief spokeswoman and deputy assistant secretary for public affairs. Like other government spokespeople before her, Clarke resented anyone outside the public affairs office trying to shape public opinion. "In meetings," says one Pentagon official, "she'd complain that we were misleading the press. She felt like Peter Worden had stepped all over her. She wanted that turf."

AND SHE FOUGHT for it. When Worden proposed the Pakistani project, Clarke was the only senior Pentagon official to object. In a February 7 memo to Worden, she wrote, "I do not concur with the current plan's tools and tactics since they would play into the hands of our adversaries by providing evidence of a controlling, biased education system." She warned of "blowback" and argued that OSI would undermine "the trust, credibility and transparency of our access to media." (The Pentagon denied that Clarke was behind OSI's demise.) But her objections didn't carry the day—until they found their way into the *Times*. Amid the ensuing fury, Clarke did almost nothing to defend the office. She told the *Times*, "Clearly, the U.S. needs to be as effective as possible in all our communications. What we're trying to do now is make clear the distinction and appropriateness of who does what." According to a source close to OSI, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and Feith had ordered up a letter to the editor of the *Times* insisting, "The Department of Defense and its supporting entities are not and will not conduct disinformation activities." When they asked Clarke to sign the letter, she refused.

While Clarke may have merely been fighting for her turf, in demolishing OSI she has eliminated the best-funded alternative to The Rendon Group and its mediacentric approach to "information warfare." (As the ultimate evidence of the triumph of Rendonism, Karen Hughes—who also had a hand in creating the CIC—will soon open an information-coordination operation inside the White House called the Office of Global Communications.) It's an approach Rendon spelled out in some detail in his 1996 speech to the Air Force Academy. "Television," he enthused, "can drive the policy process.... Television is everywhere.... My guess [is] that border patrols will be replaced by beaming patrols.... Today you can win without fighting." The problem is that in the Muslim world, he's fighting a form of asymmetrical warfare—with the United States distinctly disadvantaged. Where radical Islam fights for converts on the ground—with preachers, schools, and texts all reinforcing a totalizing ideology—Rendon wants to gain adherents with press releases and commercials. The world may have changed—"The Global Information Environment," as Rendon calls it—but not that much. The lesson of places like Egypt and Pakistan is that Hollywood and CNN—the American image—can draw crowds and still not win hearts and minds. In other words, you can win the news cycle but lose the war. ■

GREG MABLY

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Stanley Kauffmann on Films

Excessive Freedom

IT'S A FAIRLY safe bet that more windy verbiage has been expended on the Marquis de Sade than on any other French author. He is close at hand to those French critics who think that perception consists principally of turning accepted ideas upside down, particularly if the result is cryptic. Especially opprobrious to those critics are conventional concepts of morality. Sade therefore is a plump subject. He anticipated them in reversals: nowhere is accepted morality more thoroughly blasted than in Sade. French critics, relishing this kinship, have hurried to celebrate those reversals as brave pioneering.

Simone de Beauvoir's well-known essay "Must We Burn Sade?" is possibly the keystone in this French critical *arc de triomphe*. Beauvoir closely analyzes some of Sade's work—he poured out novels and plays and philosophical discussions—with rigor and insight. But, like some other critics, she is less interested in the work than in the man: his wildly hedonistic life and his declarations about it. (He asserted, for instance, that freedom can be attained only through excess.) He becomes a hero in reverse to Beauvoir. Toward the end of her essay, she quotes Saint-Just: "Nothing resembles virtue more than a great crime." (Mull that a while.) She goes on to say: "Sade's merit lies not only in his having proclaimed aloud what everyone admits with shame to himself, but in the fact that he did not simply resign himself. He chose cruelty rather than indifference."

What Beauvoir omits is that Sade's "merit" involved others. He was not alone in his moral excesses. True, like a saint seen in a distorting mirror, he was willing to suffer for putting his beliefs into practice; but unlike the saints in the usual calendar who suffered for their beliefs, he left a trail of victims behind. Has anyone ever investigated what happened to the victims? Probably not. Such an investigation would upset those French critical niceties. Certainly—to answer Beauvoir—we must not burn Sade's work. But does it follow that we must therefore canonize the man?

Every fictional treatment of Sade's life that I have encountered has tried to do it, one way or another. The best that I know is Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade*, but Weiss's play is essentially political, with Sade-in-an-asylum more sensible than the turbulent world outside. Several film-makers, too, have dealt with Sade. The most recent attempt was *Quills* (2000), made from a screenplay by Doug Wright. The essence here was Sade's effort in Napoleon's time to continue writing while imprisoned, sometimes using his own blood when he was denied ink. Thus, despite all his other activities, Sade became an early champion of the ACLU.

The weakest element in that film was Geoffrey Rush's performance as Sade. Rush simply lacked power. He had no conviction as an intricate thinker or as a writer aboil with ideas and libido. He seemed figuratively out of breath throughout. Now, in splendid contrast, comes **Sade** (Empire), in which the strongest element is Daniel Auteuil's performance of the title role. The masterly Auteuil does more than convince that he is everything he is said to be: he even seems to leave behind a trace of sinister brilliance when he leaves the screen.

The script is by Jacques Fieschi, co-author of the memorable *A Heart in Winter*, and Bernard Minoret. The year is 1794, more than a decade earlier than *Quills*, while the Revolution is roaring. Sade is in Saint-Lazaire prison for political reasons and is taken with other aristocrats to another prison, a former convent called Picpus. Here he and his fellow prisoners have to pay for their room and board, in return for which they get better quarters and food than in Saint-Lazaire. In this era of Robespierre's governance, however, a guillotine is not far away, and heads continue to be lopped. Sade escapes the tumbrel, possibly as an ironic joke by that heaven he so thoroughly disbelieved in and excoriated, a divine cruelty to keep him alive and abraded. Just when Robespierre is going to the finish he so prodigally meted out to others, Sade is set free.

The center of this film is neither drama nor narrative but Sade himself. Certainly death is always just a roll call away, but for Sade, who has no iota of cowardice, this is only a condition, not a fate. In the course of the picture, Sade's main activities are an encounter with a former mistress, now married to a revolutionary, and the initiation of a teenage virgin, whom he seduces into pleading for her seduction—which he accomplishes bizarrely, with a splash of masochism (not sadism) for himself. Also Sade does some writing during these months and, with the inmates, stages a *tableau vivant* set in a harem that erotically portrays the joys of captivity.

But the film is the man, and the man is played by Auteuil, who once again uses his great gifts to sustain unlikelihood. In *The Widow of Saint-Pierre*, to name only the most recent instance, Auteuil played a nineteenth-century army officer who went willingly to his death because of a compassion that had been stirred in him. As Sade, he is so thorough, so easily thorough, that it is tempting to call Auteuil's performance the most engaging of all the commentaries on the man. Steady yet impassioned, thoughtful and devious, a fervently devout atheist—all these qualities are given to him by the screenplay. Auteuil transmutes them into a man who is credibly the source of what he professes. Beauvoir writes: "His chief interest for us lies not in his aberrations, but in the manner in which he assumed responsibility for them." Auteuil's Sade is the emperor of a moral realm that happens not to correspond with the one around him.

The virgin is played by Isild Le Besco, who is passable but less impressive than Isabelle Huppert was as the seductee in the quasi-Sadean *Going Places* (1974). The virgin's father is played unostentatiously yet with a sure sense of aristocratic aplomb by Jean-Pierre Cassel, once the frolicking hero of *The Joker* and *The Five Day Lover*. Benoît Jacquot, the director, shows the comfort with period films that is not unusual among Europeans.

Postscript. The past year has brought an unusually large number of French films, including the two Auteuil pictures above, *Under the Sand*, *Va Savoir*, *Amélie*, *Happenstance*, and four or five others of some worth. There has been a whiff in the film-going air of the 1960s, of the days when French films were in the fore of a great flow of imported work. An insight into this recent French bounty came in a report by Robin Buss that appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* in March. He was one of nine British journalists in a total of one hundred from various countries invited to Paris for the European Meeting of French Cinema, held in the palatial Hotel de Ville. Buss described the films seen and the film people available for conversation in what was "neither exactly a mar-

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ket nor a festival." Its real purpose was "to show how cinema is embedded in French culture. An event like this annual Meeting is not only designed to sell a handful of films: it is about promoting a certain idea of France." That idea is easy to sentimentalize and exaggerate; still the films do arrive. *Vive* that aspect of *la France*. ■

The Elegist

By DEREK WALCOTT

Without End: New and Selected Poems by Adam Zagajewski translated by Clare Cavanagh and Renata Gorczynski, Benjamin Ivry, and C. K. Williams

(Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 285 pp., $30)

I.

HE LOOKS LIKE someone about whom you have already written a memoir, a face that has been encased in a small oval frontispiece in a history of Polish literature with a small pursed mouth and the deep coal eyes of a witness to the horrors of the twentieth century, the hair close-cropped or balding, or even shaven as a prisoner of the camps; someone who, as he has written, might as well be a jew, a lower-case jew. And the careful thin music that he writes, like a robin at Auschwitz, or even a lark soaring above the ashes of Auschwitz, is pure as dew, as unambiguous as water, one of the rare benedictions of our repugnant history. That gentleness has the resilience of the steel threads that pattern a spider's web. Adam Zagajewski is not merely a poet, he is the inaudible meter of breath, ours and the natural world's.

I am writing this for the pages of THE NEW REPUBLIC, a magazine whose font I admire (this is more important than some may believe), I can't say how many years after I opened a copy of this magazine in a taxi headed uptown to my class at Columbia and read Zagajewski's poem "To Go to Lvov," and gave a yelp of pleasure that served as more than a shock of recognition, but as a possession by joy. "To Go to Lvov" has become a staple in my classes. It possessed me early, with its extraordinarily evocative phrase "when dew gleams on a suitcase." In the train station where the suitcase waits it must be early morning, since there is dew, and the station must be open, and the traveler must be waiting on the platform where the rail lines shine toward a city that, like the dew, will vanish. All this, from those six words.

What does such an epiphany, in a taxi in jerky traffic at mid-morning with the crowds on the pavement, and with that sense of impatience and rage that a busy city can convey—what does such a visitation of delight do but confirm the reality of the soul, the redemption of experience, the affections of hope, of gratitude to the light and to the unheard music that light contains, blessing the hectic avenue as well as a railway platform in unhappy Poland, but most of all confirming a calling, to be a poet, and to have the friendship of poetry by a writer in your own time, one who believes in archaisms, with capital letters, such as Joy and Beauty? Why be a coward, like almost every critic?

They were a good act once, Joy and Beauty. They were well-known in the vaudeville in which you could see Rilke and Edward Thomas and Lorca in the audience, but which has now joined "The Past" as a great act that is not popular anymore, replaced by an incompetence, an arrogance, and a coarseness that makes Love, who was booked to come on next, tremble like Keats in the wings, clearing his phlegm with a doomed, consumptive cough. Yet the old numbers in the music hall, the clear untarnished tenors, haunt the memory with echoes, singers (as The Past used to introduce them) of perfect lyrics and genuine heartbreak. Walter de la Mare was one. Here, written down from memory, is an old-time Zagajewski song by de la Mare.

A Farewell

When I lie where shades of darkness
Shall no more assail mine eyes
Or the rain make lamentation
When the wind sighs,
How shall fare this world whose wonder
Was the very proof of me;
Memory fades, must the remembered
Perishing be?

Oh, when this my dust surrenders
Hand, foot, lip to dust again,
May these loved and loving faces
Please other men.
May the rusting harvest hedgerow
Still the Traveller's Joy entwine
And, as happy children, gather
Posies once mine.

Look thy last on all things lovely
Every hour; let no night
Seal thy sense in deathly slumber
Till to delight
Thou hast paid thy utmost blessing
Since that all things thou doth praise
Beauty took from those who loved them
In other days.

Beauty, as I age, has taken so many that I loved, that my "Lament for the Makers" lengthens. The maker who confirmed my discovery of Adam Zagajewski was Joseph Brodsky. I told him about the poem in THE NEW REPUBLIC, about my reading it instantly to my Columbia class so that they would recognize what they were writing for; and of course Brodsky knew him, and would help him get published in America.

IN EUROPE, IN some city, some time ago, he is sitting on a couch in the apartment of his friends with his soft, high-pitched voice, his concentration-camp crewcut, and his coal-black eyes that have the gaze of a witness. This is home, the old walls and streets and roofs with their surrounding grayness, the gray that is the weather of his poems whose lines are like branches in a wet mist. This is the Europe of unpronounceable polysyllabic surnames, of bridges and parks where lindens shake down rain. There are faint arpeggios like raindrops in the margin of his verse, which is the poetry of a politer Rilke, a poetry of asides, with elegies of absolute pitch. His bearing on that

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battered couch is one of unquestionable humility. The small tight mouth even laughs discreetly. Can great poetry be pitched to a whisper, to quiet tones of regret and retrospection? To say "Poland" is sorrowful—it is the synonym of music and pain; and this verse is Polish music as much as Chopin's.

Even in America, and not only in autumnal Europe, a drizzled park with spring buds, or the smudges of a coming fall along the Connecticut River, or the slow motion of river barges on the Hudson, yield up their connections with the verse of Zagajewski, a name that contains the word "jew" whether the small quiet man on the couch is Jewish or not. At the end of his poem "To Go to Lvov," his birthplace, he has written:

> why must every city
> become Jerusalem and every man
> a Jew....

THE FIRST CONDITION of translation is transparency. Glass cancels its own presence, so the achievement of a good translator is anonymity; but this is true only of perfect glass, and such invisible perfection, particularly in poetry, is impossible to attain, though there have been miracles, such as Rossetti's translation of Villon's "Ballad for Women of Past Time," and, in our own time, the gracious, graceful, and glacial translations of Richard Wilbur. Zagajewski, like Brodsky, seems to be lucky in his translators. It is hard to imagine what richness or subtlety has been lost in Renata Gorczynski's translation of "To Go to Lvov," or in the reverent and fragile renderings of the team of Gorczynski, Benjamin Ivry, and C. K. Williams, even if the translation of free or syllabic verse is easily based on the orchestration of the phrase and the modulation of breath, not on the rigidity of meter or the torture of matching rhyme. But in rhymed translation, too, there can be success, even if the poem is given another citizenship by the endorsement of the translator, so that we have an English Dante or an American Dante and not an Italian Dante, and the designation "Italian" even seems historically inaccurate.

Adam the namer and—after the experience of the Fall, of mankind's fall or of Poland's fall—Adam the re-namer suggests by his intimacy the privilege of affection, ours for him, and his for us, because like the second namer he cherishes things even more than the first, the way that a spider's web seems to hold and cherish a drizzle. Open *Without End* at any page and this will be confirmed:

> Autumn is always too early.
> The peonies are still blooming, bees
> are still working out ideal states,
> and the cold bayonets of autumn
> suddenly glint in the fields and the
> wind rages.

Zagajewski is a secular mystic. (One of his volumes of verse is called *Mysticism for Beginners*, though he is no beginner.) For him, concentrically, the poem revolves back to its nub, its core, in the way that the white rose of light revolves in *Paradiso* toward the close of the *Divine Comedy*, inviolable in its innocence. With him the soul is as visible in its manifestations as actual fabric, as a linden leaf or a pair of weathered boots. The soul may find itself even in a black, polluted canal. There are louder reputations than his own, there is the theatrically thunderous Milosz and the irritatingly oblique Herbert; but this is the voice of a soft-spoken man, with the conversational pitch of a seraph or a convict, a prisoner of the sublime who often achieves grandeur without changing tone.

> Youth dissolves
> in a day; girls' faces freeze
> into medallions, despair turns to rapture
> and the hard fruits of stars in the sky
> ripen like grapes, and beauty endures,
> shaken, unperturbed,
> and God is and God dies; night returns
> to us
> in the evening, and the dawn is hoary
> with dew.

These poems enter and possess you quietly. It is the quiet of a train halted on its lines. The engine throbs like a pulse, and there is always music in these verses, or the echo of music in their cabined but not claustrophobic enclosure. We look out at the gray, still landscape or cityscape through these transparent panes to the memory of a passage from Brahms or Schubert or Chopin or Mozart. For the writer, often composing to a remembered melody, music is miraculous, and sometimes small birds are its instruments. The lyric is that instant of fusion and revelation, when (as Zagajewski writes) "Joy is near." The verse shapes itself in notes under the scribe's hand, pausing to listen and then resume, and it is for this reason—of a meter hoping for the simple astonishment, self-surprising, not self-surviving—that Zagajewski's meter, the prosody of mildly broken rhythms, does not have the asthmatic gasp of so many free-verse diarists, nor the deep-breathed and oracular rotundity of Milosz.

In essence, the best phrase that one can use of Zagajewski's poetry is its fragility, its trembling. He has called one of his books *Tremor*. Ephemerality, breath, and (when Joy arrives) breathlessness is the experience of Zagajewski. I once asked him if he believed in happiness—this is not my usual method of conversation with poets, I prefer the modes of execrable obscenities and exhausting jokes—and he said that he does not believe in Happiness, but he does believe in Joy. Happiness is for the Declaration of Independence, a political condition, and also for the ending of movies. Joy, by contrast, is an illumination, as in Blake and Wordsworth and Rilke, a benediction, a visitation. In the twentieth century, it required nothing less than a belief in angels. Also the vision to absorb the horror, the gift of a particular sadness, of long-suffering countries, of

> the shadows of those who lived briefly,
> in fear, without hope, the shadows
> of our brothers, our sisters, the shadows
> of Ravensbrück and Kolyma,
> poor angels of a black salvation,
> watching us greedily.

Fragile smoke. Smoke between the lindens, smoke from the chimneys, the smoke from brown panatelas. Smoke, a simile for the soul. The soul? Is there still such a thing?

Sometimes it is as if Zagajewski is trying to write with smoke, the poem floating, the lines like the burning ends of twigs or cigarettes, or votive candles. And, yes, the soul—what was that again?

> We know we're not allowed to use your
> name.
> We know you're inexpressible,
> anemic, frail, and suspect
> for mysterious offenses as a child.
> We know that you are not allowed to live
> now
> in music or in trees at sunset.
> We know—or at least we've been told—
> that you do not exist at all, anywhere.
> And yet we still keep hearing your weary
> voice
> —in an echo, a complaint, in the letters
> we receive
> from Antigone in the Greek desert.

Soul as the fact of smoke, of the funeral pyre, of mass cremation, and as with Antigone, of invincible legend.

ZAGAJEWSKI'S CONCENTRATION on an image, a memory, is deliberately askew, but he is never perverse like a surrealist. This is instead an intimate and private idiosyncrasy that in his prose expands into fantasy and in his verse contracts into epigram. Here is a passage from *Two Cities*, a memoir that appeared in English in 1995:

> But one had to live there. And oh, wonder
> of wonders, here too there were sunrises

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and sunsets, and the same seasons of the year passed through calendars and municipal parks. A wooden replica of the Eiffel Tower, the transmitter of a prewar radio station, loomed over the city. Occasionally the setting sun hid behind it.

Taking the accuracy of the translation for granted, one might ask: why "occasionally"? Wouldn't the sun, at the same season, always, and not just "occasionally," set there? But then one smiles at the accuracy of the vagueness, since neither the observer nor the sun was always in the same place every day at the same time, and occasionally the sunset could have been obscured by the weather and the season. Then the hiding gives the sun the essence of that egotism that is autobiography, the anthropomorphic, the pathetic fallacy (which in good hands need not be a fallacy at all) that gives the sulking or sullen sun no reason why it should conceal itself. It also contains an expanse of time, since the sun would not set in the same place over the seasons. "Occasionally": this homely detail provokes more character in the sun, whose conduct, one might say, like poetic inspiration, can become contradictory, baffling, defiant. Conduct that poetry understands and science rejects. And the passage continues:

> Exactly at the moment it was supposed to slip beneath the comforter of the earth, the enormous red-hot ball stopped of its own accord and relished a moment of pure immobility, which drove astronomers crazy—they'd press their fingernails into their palms and shout, "Faster, faster," as they watched their chronometers.

But the poet is not an astronomer, not interested in chronometers. Is the movement of the sun the most regular feature of experience? Not for the poet. He is capable of finding surprise even in the sun.

THE DICTATES OF meter, in poetry and in the natural world, are not inflexible and constant. The marvel of Zagajewski's poetry is that he can carry over these subtle, fictional, prosaic observations, including the idiosyncrasy of his humor, into verse. The following lines, for example, are both real and wonderful, and they are also funny, the extra pinch of salt that Zagajewski adds to the tone of the prose of Pasternak or Mandelstam or Milosz:

> A woodpecker in his red cap suddenly
> brought back
> the stationmaster in Stary Sacz.

In a way, humor is the source or the basis of simile, for simile contains the astonishment of comparisons, and is therefore joyous and even infantile, as in Blake's sense. To preserve innocence as the variety of experience that punishes us is a gift, and a clarity that is found in the rejection of chronological time. It is this same quality of goodness that shines with touching stillness in the poetry of John Clare and Edward Thomas—not the innocence of a helpless and protesting victim, but a virtue that keeps its steadiness:

A Flame

> God, give us a long winter
> and quiet music, and patient mouths
> and a little pride—before
> our age ends.
> Give us astonishment
> and a flame, high, bright.

Indeed, there are single lines, in the translation's scansion, that could be verse or prose.

> The gentle pastel hills deceived the
> emigrants

That line happens to be prose, from *Two Cities*. But this is the crux of greatness, meter. Let us consider this closely. Great poetry does not have a sense of caution,

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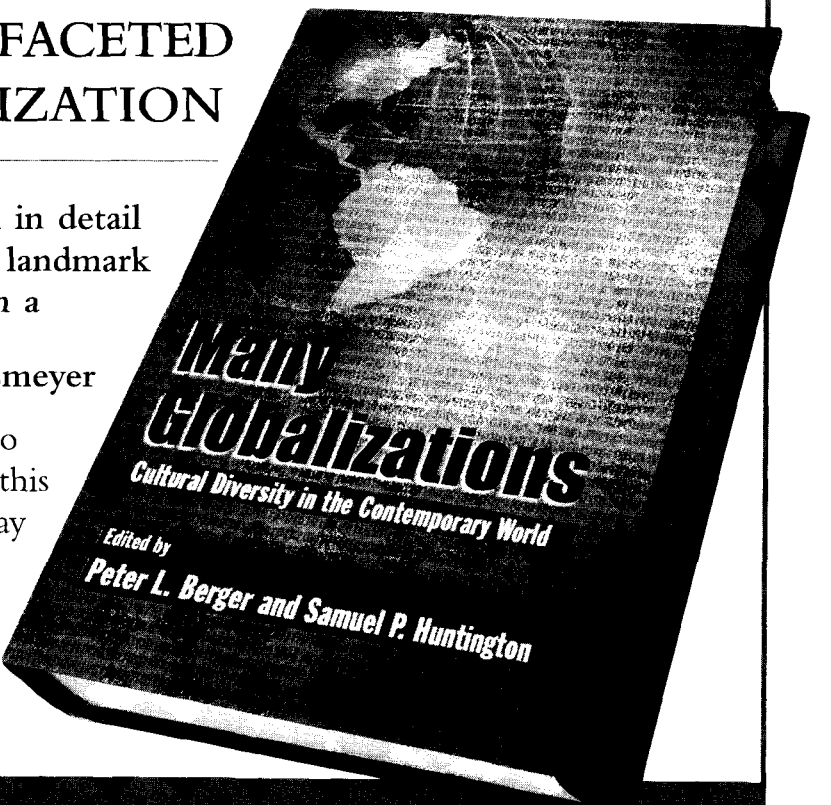

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and it does not refer out of dependency; nor is it original in the sense of discovery, nor—most important of all—is its meter private. Now, there is a plangency to Zagajewski's meter that makes it diaristic, a whispered journal of the self done with an irregular breath in which phrases are rhythmically articulated without a heraldic or monumental mold. In most discussions of meter, the caricatured contrast is between the bellowed and the asthmatic, or (moronically speaking) between regular verse and free verse; and free verse is, according to opinion, the prosody of our recent century, and the natural meter for our time, the meter of everyone you can name and claim for it, in all languages—especially in all languages, since free verse makes itself more pliable to translation. Free verse is the meter of Zagajewski's Polish contemporaries Herbert, Milosz, and Szymborska. Yet free verse, depriving itself of the incantatory and of rhyme, can only up to a point be hallowed by memory, by recitation. It was this limitation that made Joseph Brodsky choose the rhymers over the basically journalistic or rhetorical free verse poets—Dickinson and Frost and Stevens over Whitman. The argument that Brodsky rejected was that regular, monodic rhythm has been abrupted by the destructions of the century, that harmony and unity have been forever shattered, that modern poetry can only be true in fragments.

ALL THIS ERRONEOUS conventional wisdom makes the nature of modern memory spastic, broken, convulsive. There is an echo of this in Zagajewski, owed not least to the shape of the poem on the page. The free verse epigram, in any language, carries with it the pre-figured echo of translation, whereas the rhymed couplet or stanza almost annihilates translation, and sticks to the breath and the memory with the immediacy of a postage stamp.

But who dictates this breathing, this prosody? Not a new order of experience, but the same old order that, as a consequence of its ownership of history, declares the rules for contemporary art, and decides that painting is archaic and installations are the truth, and makes the critical judgment of underdeveloped countries old-fashioned, imitative, or provincial. The Russian empire did not have enough creative authority to make Poland provincial; but there is a tone of subjugation, an evasion of absolutes with capital letters such as Beauty, Truth, and Joy, especially in the American empire, whose prosody is one of false, stuttering humility or ordinariness, as if only the cultural amateurs of backward countries can remain interested in, and even greedy for, the sublime. The sublime? Who talks that way anywhere anymore?

The pitch of the unrhymed, syllabic verse is that of the aside, the parenthesis, its breath or meter avoiding the closures of the melody, the incantation produced by the grid of form. Superficially, Zagajewski's poems appear to continue that modern tradition, but in reality they proceed from another echo, of formal scansion. The regularity of their aural shape is a tribute to what is missing and mourned for. Their unity lies in the constancy of an elegiac mode. Their honesty is owed to the fact that they cannot presume to have a universal wisdom. Their lower-case and their enjambment convey an earned humility.

THE POETRY OF Zagajewski is anachronistic, except if the soul is a certainty. He has approximated poetry to prayer, and throughout this collection there is something of the hushed psalter, the whisper of hermetic, even monkish meditation. We feel as if we are eavesdropping on a man's prayers—or, if we were The State, listening to a playback of his bugged meditations. This is why they speak so ravishingly of the soul of Poland: his poems are not declarative, like those of his contemporaries, but almost secret, with the pain and the privilege of secrecy.

Robert Lowell praised Pasternak for being a great poet in his prose. He probably meant not the prose fiction of *Doctor Zhivago*, but the prose memoirs collected under the title *Safe Conduct*. There is in Zagajewski's memoir the same faint thunder of rumination, the same delight that takes the reality of reason into legend:

> In the city of my childhood Plato's two great beasts came together. One was naturally organic to a considerable degree, practically covered with real animal fur and, actually, if left alone, if not irritated by the Jews or the Ukrainians, was good-natured and languid. The other had artificial but sharp teeth, fake skin, red banners, and loudspeakers instead of a larynx. One came from Lvov, the other from Moscow. Two conformities. One moulded by centuries, formed by many generations of gentry and pharmacists, shoemakers and doctors, the other constructed in a hurry by Lenin and his guillotined friends.

The instinct here is to remember this prose by heart, almost more so than with Zagajewski's verse, which sounds shy of the incantatory, too shy perhaps. The prose has no compulsion toward rhyme, as all verse does. But there is nothing instinctual about free verse. It is basically a strategy of evasions, of the fear of the banality of melody; and a fear of melody is a fear of memory. The poems do not offer themselves to recitation; they almost refute shape. They may, politically, resist the authority of form by the obliquity of subterfuge; their denial is a form of *samizdat* against the martial beat of tradition, against the hymn and the march. They are part of the Polish protest against both German and Soviet occupation, against the grandiosity of history; defiance not at the barricades, but in the study or the pew.

ZAGAJEWSKI'S NATIONALITY IS a strong presence in his poetry. In some ways it is his poetry. There is a plangency, a lamentation, in the sound of the word "Poland" that reverberates, that invades our sense of that country, that ratifies our knowledge of its occupation by three empires, of its subjugation and defiance. There is enlightenment and misery in the anguished names of its cities: Warsaw and Kraków, and, most emblematically of all, owing now to Zagajewski's great sunlit elegy, Lvov.

What Lvov looms bright as, in Zagajewski's recollection, is a cloud, an image of itself that the force of memory clarifies through a fog, but also as a vanishing solidity. In the stippled glow of Zagajewski's language, Lvov is a city as ripe as a peach hanging from a branch, glowing and luscious and complete, as luminous and as short-lived as a tropical sunset; but it is also the Old and New Jerusalem, its parks like Blakeian meadows, its streets and its houses as precious as Henry Vaughan's.

> My soul there is a country,
> Far beyond the stars
> Where stands a wingèd Sentry
> All skilful in the wars.

Zagajewski's Lvov is a place impossible in its evenness, where, in its celebrant's memory, in his tender mockery

> under the awning of a Venetian café
> the snails converse about eternity.

These lines provoke a gasp, a smile of acknowledgment at the perfection of the metaphor for the slow-minded artists and intellectuals seated under a pretentious pliant covering, their urgent, hunched shoulders like shells, their hands gesturing tremblingly like horns, with what other topic but immortality? It is this marvel of exactness and delight that made me fasten on and hoard this poem many years ago in a city whose two towers, we believed, could never vanish.

In many of the essays in *Two Cities*, Zagajewski writes as an ironist, even as a

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parodist of totalitarian doctrine. This is an irony that exposes contradictions by its detailed universality, its pessimism, its conviction of futility. These perverse and bitter epistles take the form of public addresses, private reports (also to God), and confessions, all poisoned by that cynicism which is the opposite of Zagajewski's poetry and personality. He is saying: I try to write what is beautiful in verse, but I know what is perverse and I express it in prose, sin being more interminable than good thoughts or good deeds. Evil is infinite, good is constrained, joy is brief:

Three Histories

> There are at least three different human histories, not one: the history of force, the history of beauty, and the history of suffering. Only the first two are catalogued and recorded, more or less. They have their professors and their textbooks. But suffering leaves no traces. It is mute. That is, mute *historically*. A scream does not last long, and there is no note symbol to represent it and make it last.
>
> That is why it is so difficult to understand the essence of Auschwitz. From the point of view of the history of force, it was an episode, undeserving of closer study. How much more interesting was the Battle of Wagram, for example. As the history of suffering, Auschwitz was fundamental. Unfortunately, the history of suffering does not exist. Art historians are not interested in Auschwitz either. Mud, barracks, low skies. Fog and four skinny poplars. Orpheus does not stroll this way. Ophelia doesn't choose to drown here.

For the exile, carrying two languages in his head simultaneously, there is a running translation of every moment, of water, hands, soap, but also of mountains and museums, of the sound of the name he goes by in his own country, of the buds of the linden and the asterisks of stars, the banal and the sublime; and Zagajewski seems to write and to think bilingually because of the innate modesty of his spirit, a spirit that catalogues everything as being unimportant, an inaudible dictionary that has no favorite words, a perambulating perception that carries the impartiality of a naturalist, to whom a fallen angel or a falling leaf can be recorded with the same evenness, the same ingenuous awe.

That ingenuousness is monastic, even medieval, so that Zagajewski's book has a secular sanctity, the steady purpose of a missal. That purpose, as he writes, is "to praise the mutilated world." Open the book haphazardly, and there is this:

The Gothic

> Who am I here in this cool cathedral
> and who
> is speaking to me so obscurely?
> Who am I, suddenly subject to a new
> atmospheric
> pressure? Whose voices fill
> this stone space? Voices of carpenters,
> ashes of ash now? Voices
> of vanished pilgrims
> who still can't stay still?
> Who am I, interred in this slim vault,
> where is my name,
> who's trying to snatch and hurl it away
> like wind stealing a cap?

Adam Zagajewski is more than a lower-case poet. His is the quiet voice at the corner of the immense devastations of an obscene century, more intimate than Auden, yet as cosmopolitan as Milosz, Celan, or Brodsky.

> I circled the Parc de Saint-Cloud, faster,
> faster,
> winter over, spring not yet.
> In the park, barren, bereft of its king,
> I kept saying it, "Cruel," my only
> witnesses
> lizards and birds.
> Then, through a dense mist the white
> sun boiled:
> I was impaled by sharp barbs of bliss.

Thorns of a benign porcupine, spines of harmless and radiant roses, arrows for a willing Sebastian, pricklings of recognition like the hairs that rose on the back of Housman's neck, those sharp barbs of bliss come like "a shower of typewriter keys," as Zagajewski reports in this stirring and profound and delightful collection. ■

Saint Maya

By JOHN MCWHORTER

A Song Flung Up to Heaven by Maya Angelou

(Random House, 256 pp., $23.95)

I.

WHEN I WAS in college in the early 1980s, the black folksinger Odetta was invited to campus to perform. Clad in African garb and accompanying herself on the guitar, she weaved together inspirational songs and savory anecdotes garnished with ancient wisdom. She rocked the house, the young and mostly white students delighted to be sitting at the feet of a black Earth goddess "telling it like it is." I thought I had a good time. But later my white roommate shocked me by dismissing the whole thing. His problem with Odetta was her smugness, her obvious expectation that her audience bow to her moral superiority without question.

This threw me. I had a natural African American impulse to let this worldly-wise middle-aged black woman's maternalism wash over me. And as a post–civil rights African American, I assumed that it was a white audience's job to follow suit. I had never heard anyone question what was, in fact, a rather manipulative way of approaching an audience. One part of me questioned whether my friend was a "racist"; but I also knew that few white performers could have gotten away with the Odetta tone, and that since white eighteen-year-olds could not have played any part in the oppression that Odetta had encountered in her life, it was a bit of an act to require them to accept her saintliness without question.

I suspect that my friend would feel the same way about Maya Angelou's series of autobiographies, now concluded with *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*. Since the success of the first installment, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which appeared in 1969, Angelou has followed up with no less than five memoirs. To dismiss as smug *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*—which chronicles an awkward Southern black girl's path to adulthood from poverty in Arkansas to working-class black San Francisco in the 1940s—would suggest a certain blindness to the poignancy of being young, female, and black in America before the era of civil rights; but I will concede that in her subsequent volumes Angelou strides through her narratives with a studied Odetta-like nobility. Throughout these narratives, Angelou implicitly dares the reader to question her private line to God and Truth.

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I must confess also that I am not immune to the Angelou scriptures. Sometimes the hauteur is nothing more dire than a kind of black-mother wit. And Angelou's life has certainly been a full one: from the hardscrabble Depression-era South to pimp, prostitute, supper-club chanteuse, performer in *Porgy and Bess*, coordinator for Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference, journalist in Egypt and Ghana in the heady days of decolonization, comrade of Malcolm X, eyewitness to the Watts riots. She knew King and Malcolm, Billie Holiday and Abbey Lincoln. This last book ends with Angelou penning the first line of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, at the beginning of her career as a famous writer. I could never hope to taste as much of life as she has; and if my lot were as rich as hers, I would more likely wind up in therapy than flattering Bill Clinton with a poem at his inauguration.

Maya Angelou by Zach Trenholm for The New Republic

THE WOMAN WHO stood at that wintry podium in Washington first appears in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* as a little girl so nervous at an Easter recitation in church that she flees the stage and wets herself. Her parents have sent her and her intense little James Baldwin stand-in of a brother to live with their maternal grandmother in a small Arkansas town. Until her early teens she lives in the close-knit but grim black quarter of Stamps, where her rock-steady grandmother raises her while running the local store. The whites on the other side of town are a distant presence, ever menacing with the threat of lynchings. Angelou's crippled uncle quietly looms as a symbol of the meaning of being black in this time and place, with grimy, contemptuous white kids occasionally descending upon the store and treating him and the grandmother like lower beings, making a mockery of their dignity.

Then her mother divorces her father and takes Angelou back to live with her in St. Louis, where Angelou meets a near-white grandmother with a German accent, marvels at urban amenities such as indoor plumbing, and comes to worship her gorgeous, eternally savvy man-trap of a mother. But soon her mother's boyfriend rapes her, after which she all but refuses to speak, and she is banished to Stamps. She remains essentially silent to all but her brother for years. But by her late teens she rejoins her mother, who has moved to the Bay Area. Today what remains of the San Francisco neighborhood where they settled is the seedy Western Addition district, steadily shrunken by gentrification; but in the 1930s and 1940s it was a thriving center of African American life, and Angelou paints a loving portrait of a bygone type of black neighborhood.

Visiting her father, who now lives in Los Angeles with a new wife, Angelou ends up being dragged along with him on a drunken junket to Mexico, where she watches him cheat on his wife and then drives for hours—her first time behind the wheel—back across the border with him passed out in the backseat. Misled by some things that she has read, she goes through a spell of wondering whether she, as a gangly, small-breasted woman, is a hermaphrodite or a lesbian. Partly to dispel any question on the matter, she solicits a local boy to deflower her. This leaves her pregnant, and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* ends with her going to sleep with her new son.

In the wake of *Sounder*, *Roots*, *The Color Purple*, Oprah Winfrey, and the explosion of black autobiographies, Angelou's first memoir cannot register as freshly as it did in 1969. But back then first-person narratives by black women were thin on the ground. Personal accounts of racial discrimination were eagerly sought by whites seeking to understand "those people," while blacks justly valued them as overdue *cris de coeur*. It also did not hurt that the book's descriptions of bodily functions and sex were frank for their time. And so the reviewers and the readers of Angelou's book cherished it for its "honesty."

But in the sequel, *Gather Together in My Name*, the honesty begins to look more and more formulaic. Since these books are autobiography, we accept that the events that Angelou describes actually occurred. But her adversities and adventures begin to seem increasingly in need of explanation. She is seventeen, for example, when she carries her son to term. The father was a virtual stranger who never appears again. Was there no question of an abortion? This was a choice then, just as it is now. Angelou openly avows in *Gather Together* that she is not religious, and she also says that she would never have considered welfare. There are any number of reasons why a working-class teenager between the wars would choose to carry an unexpected pregnancy to term, but there are just as many reasons why she would choose otherwise, and Angelou never lets us into how her mind was working.

Questions of this kind become more urgent as *Gather Together in My Name* proceeds. Angelou dines with a lesbian couple who make advances on her and becomes disoriented from her first experience with marijuana. As a desperate measure to distract her unwanted suitors, she suggests an arrangement whereby she procures men for them to sleep with for money. Never mind that this would not be anybody's first idea for escaping a sexually awkward situation.

And Angelou actually spends months pimping for these women! This, remember, was a staid eighteen-year-old with an infant son. Angelou gives no indication that she was desperate for cash: she has been supporting herself with a solid wait-

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ressing job. And she has an avowed proclivity for reading the likes of Thomas Wolfe in her spare time. Why, then, did she make this particular choice? Not long afterward, she becomes involved with an older man who frequents the restaurant at which she works. He claims that he needs a large sum of money to divorce his wife, and suggests that she work as a prostitute in a brothel for Mexican wage-laborers to earn the money. And she does! This prim, bookish, withdrawn little girl discussing "The Fall of the House of Usher" with her brother heads for the whorehouse. She even has the money to pay a woman to take care of her son while she is turning tricks. Again, why? And as soon as she starts working there, the man for whom she is extending herself in this horrible, sacrificial way suddenly becomes a glowering pimp who insists that she call him "Daddy," employs the brothel's madam, and is revealed to have a pretty young wife whom he has no intention of leaving. And yet she sticks with him for a good while. Why?

THE PEOPLE IN these flamboyant tales—the narrator included—have a pulp-novel incoherence. By the time one turns to the third installment in Angelou's saga of herself, *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*, one has given up the search for any kind of motives or reasons. One night Angelou is at a white party and, feeling out of place, gets drunk alone in the kitchen. Hours later she comes back out into the living room and the only people left are a white female cabaret singer and some male friends. One thing leads to another, and, fascinated with Angelou's blackness and poise, they wonder if she might be able to take the white woman's place at the club. Angelou, having never sung in her life, ventures to sing a calypso song in a put-on West Indian accent. They are entranced and set her up with an audition for the owner of the cabaret. She practices a bit over the next few days, and lo and behold! She gets the gig and is a big hit—which marks the beginning of the show-business career that takes up the rest of the book.

But any number of us oiled up with a few drinks could do a charming party turn without winding up as the attraction at a tony supper club. Josephine Baker did not become the toast of Paris by just shaking her booty for some theater gypsies as a party wound down. She paid her dues in a touring chorus line, and gradually attracted attention for making funny faces, and was rewarded with a respectable third-banana speaking part in the authors' next show, and got some more attention, and so on. But all Angelou had to do, it appears, was get up and sing "Run Joe" for a few tipsy strangers and *c'est ça*. We can read between the lines that Angelou also danced well, because before long she nabs a featured dancing spot in the production of *Porgy and Bess* that toured to such acclaim in the 1950s. It is exciting to read her account of this legendary production as it toured Europe—until we begin to wonder just how Angelou got the part when, by her own admission, she screwed up her audition, and hundreds of other talented people were lined up around the block outside.

Presumably it was her dancing; but nowhere have we been given an indication of how she acquired the chops. Earlier she teams up with a man in a small-time jitterbugging and tap act. And how do you think this happened? A man she meets waitressing says that he needs a dance partner, and she falls into a split. Alas, she catches her foot in a floor heater—but still he takes her on. I don't mean to be tiresome, but why? Of course, she acquits herself nicely in clubs all over the city. Never mind that countless adolescent girls taking after-school ballet classes can do a split and catch their foot on a table leg, but they do not end up dancing for Michael Smuin.

It's as if Frederick Douglass simply mentioned that "I had taught myself to read and write, and hence wrote the book you are reading" instead of providing the extraordinary account of his education: how he studied letters on marked shipyard timbers, traded bread for reading lessons with white boys, and closely studied Webster's *American Spelling Book*. And the subsequent installments of the Angelou story do not relieve the reader's confusion about it all. Angelou next marries a white man who frequents a record shop where she works (a job that she gets when the white proprietor sees her coming in often and just singles her out as someone who looks like a good hire). After a few years, the marriage ends because he decides that he is "tired of being married." He is quickly gone and is basically never mentioned again. But was that really it? Angelou suggests that he was rather controlling, but this is a problem in all of her subsequent relationships as well. In an autobiography in which a black woman marries outside of her race in the 1950s, we need to know more.

"I TOOK MY young son, Guy, and joined the beatnik brigade," Angelou mentions out of nowhere at the start of *The Heart of a Woman*, book four. She wore her hair "natural" and lived in a commune with whites. Why? This was not the typical choice of the working-class black person in the 1950s. Who were the people she lived with? What led to this

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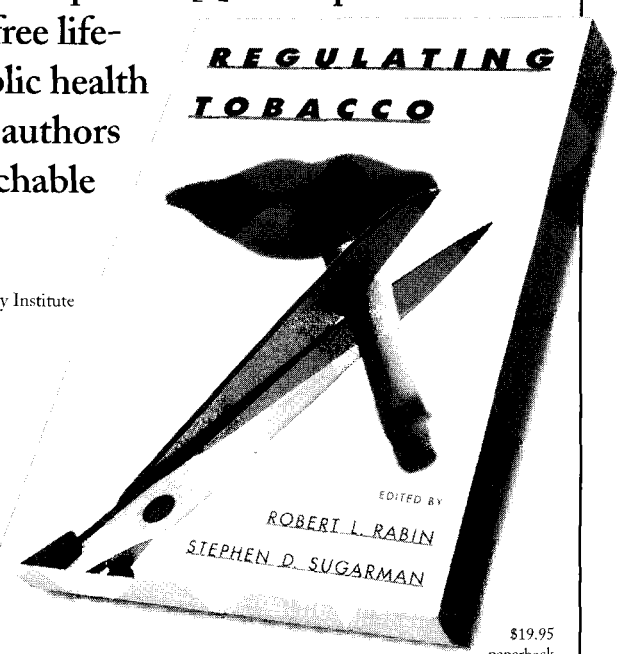

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choice? But Angelou only gives this passing phase a page or so. In the last book, a white manager whom Angelou "knows around" gives her open-ended financial support, asserting simply that she is the most talented person he knows. But at the time Angelou was a small-time nightclub singer with a minor theatrical resumé, who had yet to publish anything except one piece in an obscure Cuban journal of Marxism. No one had even hinted at this point that she was a star in the making in any arena. So the gentleman's generosity makes no sense, like most everything else in this didactic tale.

There are other questions. Why did Angelou, with her frequently noted passion for books and learning, not aspire to a college education? I'm sure she had her reasons, but I find it difficult to glean them from her presentation of herself. She gives hints of an anti-establishment temper. After a spell living in abandoned cars in a city dump with teenaged runaways (why?), she writes: "I knew I knew very little, but I was certain that the things I had yet to learn wouldn't be taught to me at George Washington High School." And there are occasional indications of a leeriness of "bourgeois blacks." Of her father's second wife, she grouses: "When I met Delores she had all the poses of the Black bourgeoisie without the material basis to support the postures," and at another point she briefly notes that "the small percentage of classmates who went on to college had become unbearably stuck up and boring." And yet this is someone who casually remarks that her impression of Europe in her early twenties included Dickens, Cockney accents, Maupassant, "beery burghers," Cartier-Bresson's photographs, and *Open City*. This is not the cultural baggage of the typical working-class person, of any color or any era. One of the lesbians for whom she pimps says: "You speak such good English, you must have a diploma." Billie Holiday does not hesitate to call her a "square."

Angelou even maintains a sense of herself as "not one of the boys": in her relationship with a laconic meat-and-potatoes bail bondsman, she sweetly notes that "he was Tom to his friends, but to establish myself as a type different from the people he knew, I called him Thomas." But why was Thomas, who was unlikely to have much to say about Rossellini or those burghers, less "boring" for Angelou than the middle-class black men who shared her *Weltanschauung*? Before the 1960s, bookish black women of Angelou's origins typically became schoolteachers, which was one of the few dignified professions open to black women at the time. A subset strove to get a college degree: in the Bay Area, San Francisco City College beckoned, as it still does, as a way to get a degree from a solid institution for a nominal fee. But instead Angelou drives cable cars, cooks, pimps, does exotic dancing, turns tricks, and sleeps in abandoned cars, all the while poring over serious literature. Why?

THE SELECTIVE NATURE of Angelou's narrative style extends to her depictions of the main characters. I should more properly term them "people," as this is a memoir rather than a novel. But such is the nature of Angelou's style that the reality of these characters is often easy to forget.

Consider Angelou's son Guy. He is a cocoa-butter saint who does not do a single bad thing in all six books. His mother love is so deep that when Angelou gets back from a year's absence touring, he breaks out into a rash and nearly goes mad out of fear that she might leave again. Threatened in his mid-teens by a murderous gang over a girl, he stands them down with nary a blink. Angelou is furious with a man responsible for getting Guy's neck broken in a car accident, but Guy, immobilized in a head cast for weeks, cannot even consider casting a stone: "If I can see Richard and understand that he has been more hurt than I, what about you?" As a college student, he soberly intones: "Now, I am a man. Your life is your own, and mine belongs to me. I am not rejecting you, I'm just explaining that our relationship has changed." Only when he and Angelou are parted does she give us oblique reports that Guy has become "difficult to control," but the implication is only that he is a spirited young boy testing his wings.

Consider also the mother "character." Vivian Baxter is one of my favorites in the chronicle, with her scotch on the rocks in one hand and her cigarette in the other, dressed to the teeth and staring anything down. I started waiting for her re-appearances as I would those of a favorite next-door-neighbor character in a sitcom. But a sitcom type, a kind of Winona on *Good Times*, is all we get. After Angelou leaves home in *Gather Together in My Name*, she has Vivian walk on a couple of times, toss off some savory aphorisms stage center, and exit. Yet this is the woman who gave Angelou away to her grandmother for several years—and while married to her father, not as a cash-strapped girl on her own. Just once, late in the series, Angelou attributes this in passing to "immaturity." After the rape episode, a few months of Angelou's sullen silence is too much for Vivian to take, and she sends her back to Stamps. Were there not a few "issues" here? Vivian, in all of her wisdom, also appears to have chosen one very weak man after another. But Angelou just gives us outfits, pretty skin, scents, and her "I've got some talk for you."

In some instances, Angelou becomes simply a caricaturist; and this extends to her use of language. Angelou is well aware that African American speech comprises a continuum, with standard English on one end and Black English on the other, summing this up in a fine paragraph:

> In the classroom we all learned past participles, but in the streets and in our homes the Blacks learned to drop s's from plurals and suffixes from past-tense verbs. We were alert to the gap separating the written word from the colloquial. We learned to slide out of one language and into another without being conscious of the effort. At school, in a given situation, we might respond with "That's not unusual." But in the street, meeting the same situation, we easily said "It be's like that sometimes."

Yet rarely in her six books does Angelou depict herself or any other principal saying the likes of "It be's like that sometimes." More often than not, she has her working-class black subjects speaking in highly unlikely ways for the situations in which she depicts them.

Guy is the most extreme case. He always sounds like Andy Hardy: "Oh, Mother, come now." Or: "I have not decided just what I want to do. Whether I shall stay in Ghana and finish at the university, or go to another country to finish my education." Or my favorite: "Gee, I'm famished." Surely Guy commanded standard English; he and his mother were word hounds and passed the time playing Scrabble. But the simple fact is that a young black boy of working-class origins who talked like this all the time would not have friends. Casual speech is used between parents and children, but Guy always talks to his own mother as if he were talking to a receptionist. The same is true with Angelou's brother Bailey. He has an active social life among the humble neighborhood folk, but in a moment of emotional crisis he is suddenly Leslie Howard: "There is a tide and time in every man's life," he declaims, "when he must push off from the wharf of safety into the sea of chance." Is this really what this man bred in the rural black South said as he packed his bags in a huff?

Angelou writes herself talking this way as well. A man proposes to her when she is already engaged, and her response is: "I'm obliged to clear up the matter with Thomas." The contrast is especially telling when Angelou talks this way while another black character dwells casually

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in the vernacular. Billie Holiday says: "Chicken and rice is always good. But fry that sucker. Fry him till he's ready. I can't stand no goddamn rare chicken." And Angelou replies: "Billie, I don't claim to be a great singer, but I know how to mix groceries." Mix groceries? Angelou seems to feel that it's all right to have minor players speaking naturally, but that major personages must have their speech cleaned up.

Now, the norms of public use of language have indeed changed over the past thirty years. When Angelou came of age in the 1940s, vernacular speech was limited to a narrower range in writing and speechmaking. Education still included oratorical training (Angelou won an Elks Club oratorical contest as a child), and Black English had yet to be analyzed and celebrated as a legitimate variety of speech. Angelou is not the only black writer of pre-1960s vintage inclined to write black characters "upward," out of a sense that Black English does not belong on the printed page beyond dialect poems and spiritual lyrics. But what is so troublesome in Angelou's memoirs is the linguistic double standard: only the stars are written "upward," despite their humble Southern roots.

The result is that the conversations do not ring true. A down-to-earth black mentor says to Angelou: "O.K., old sweet nappy-head thing. Come on and talk to Uncle Wilkie." Angelou replies: "I'm so unhappy. And I have done such harm to Clyde." But when revealing despair to an intimate, the working-class black woman does not typically speak like Claudette Colbert. Indeed, it was common in movies of Colbert's time to have characters of lowly origin somehow speaking plummy high English while their relatives and their intimates spoke the language of the streets, and Angelou indicates that she frequented such flicks. This lends the movies an air of fantasy that impedes their communication with most moderns, and in Angelou's books it has a similar distancing effect.

To be sure, one senses that Angelou actually was something of a verbal outlier among her crowd. There is the lesbian's comment about her "good English," and her impulse to call a man "Thomas" who was known elsewhere as Tom. And this seems to be the verbal reflection of a general remove that she maintains between herself and others. With her diction, she holds the reader, too, at arm's length. Her narrative language is pleasantly lapidary, but it also tends to aim even higher than the literary norm in word-choice and syntax. Here is a description of a high-speed car trip:

> The drive to the airport was an adventure in motoring and a lesson in conversational dissembling.... Noticing that he was conducting a car, he would swivel his head occasionally and give a moment's attention to the road.

"Motoring," "dissembling," "conducting a car": this leaning toward ten-dollar words is typical of all of Angelou's books, in which one "telephones" rather than calls and "assists" instead of helps, in which a living room is "commodious" instead of large. In Africa, Angelou has people "telling of" things rather than talking about them. This preference for decorative vocabulary lends the narrative a certain posed and precious quality, a succession of pretty scenes instead of life as it is lived by real people. This is not good in a writer who prides herself on probity.

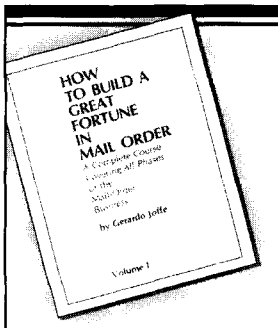
And the tendency extends beyond mere word-choice into general issues of presentation. In *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*, a man whom Angelou has a significant relationship with is never described as anything but "The African." I was impressed with how seamlessly she managed to craft page after page without anyone happening to address him directly or refer to him by name. But if the man was so important to her, then why does she withhold something as basic as his name? If for some reason she wanted to maintain his privacy, why not a false name for the book? Then the couple fall out so badly that she summons her family and breaks with him for good—but she gives us only the merest hint of what the fight was about.

All of this results in Angelou herself remaining a kind of cardboard cutout, especially after the first volume. I have never read autobiographical writing where I had such a hard time summoning a sense of how the subject talks, or a sense of who the subject really is.

II.

But in the end these are not quite the right questions. For the subject of Maya Angelou's memoirs is finally not herself at all. The subject is African American life. Around the middle of the fourth book I realized that what Angelou intends is to pose the variegated life that she has led as a framework upon which to hang a celebration and a defense of black American people as a whole. And when regarded in this way, as apologetic writing rather than as autobiographical writing, the gaps and the tics in these books make sense, revealing a meaning and a value in Angelou's series beyond its brute confectionary appeal.

When Angelou wrote *I Know Why the*



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Caged Bird Sings in the late 1960s, the black writer in America tended to write under an imperative to teach a lesson that is now old news for most of us: that African American culture is a vibrant, resilient culture rather than an unhealthy deviation from the American mainstream. Angelou was on the front lines of this effort, a literary manifestation of the imperative that reigned in the black scholarship of the period to "combat the contentions of Negro inferiority," as John Hope Franklin put it in 1963 in "The Dilemma of the American Negro Scholar."

Thus Angelou's books are laced with salutary observations about what she calls, as was common among blacks in the segregated era in which she grew up, "my people": the music of black voices, obsessive references (in the first two books especially) to how clean-scrubbed black people are, dating rituals, and church traditions—this latter pointing up her missionary impulse, in that Angelou avows that she herself is not religious. This is all tangential to the customary themes and materials of the chronicle of an individual life. But Angelou is celebrating "her people" as much as herself.

And in this regard the stiff language reveals itself as an effort to show that black people are capable of mastering and artfully using standard English—a rebuke to the Amos 'n' Andy stereotype. Blacks of Angelou's generation came of age before the erosion throughout America of the assumption that standard English was one's Sunday best. In those days, scruffy speakers were carefully "cleaned up" in the press; pop music was sung to lyrics as crafted as light verse. Thus Guy's "Gee, I'm famished" instead of the more likely "Man, I'm hungry."

THE DIDACTIC IMPULSE also explains Angelou's stagy portrait of Africa. Moving to Egypt with an African husband and relocating to Ghana after the marriage dissolves, Angelou limns a utopian cartoon where the sun is always shining; all men are ebony statues with pearly white teeth; all women are elegant, grounded, and sensual; and human relations are deathlessly warm and supportive, decorated by beautiful formulas of address and charming rituals of ceremonial respect. Surely Angelou saw more than this; but she is on a proselytizing mission, teaching her audience never to think that Africa is a dark continent full of savages. This is why these people, who are dignified individuals, "tell of" things rather than "talk about" them.

This also explains the passages in which Angelou falls into playing the victim as much as being the victim. She attends a speech by Malcolm X in which he says that "any white American who says he's your friend is either weak . . . or he's an infiltrator." This is her judgment: "Malcolm's words were harsh, but too close to the bitter truth to argue." The realities of the period notwithstanding, surely this is a bit of a pose: did Angelou really doubt the sincerity of the white kids getting beaten up on the Freedom Rides? What about the various white people whom she thanks in the books' acknowledgments? Disturbed by her first reading of Genet's *The Blacks*, in which blacks turn out to be as morally corrupt as whites when they attain power, Angelou muses: "Black people could never be like whites. We were different. More respectful, more merciful, more spiritual." She goes on to defend this sentiment by lauding black cooks for not poisoning their employers' food, by praising blacks as a whole for always turning the other cheek. It was one thing to entertain hopes of black innocence shortly after the eclipse of colonialism in Africa in the early 1960s; but Angelou wrote this passage, which comes from *The Heart of a Woman*, in the late 1970s.

But Angelou was toiling in the service of a broader point, speaking to the naked racism that she has known and insisting that she and other blacks got past it. There are plenty of episodes of genuine bigotry in these books. When she is performing in *The Blacks*, a white woman approaches her after a performance to extol how much the play taught her about the black predicament, but the conversation goes wrong and ends with the woman recoiling from Angelou's touch and hissing: "You people!" It is in response to episodes such as this one that Angelou confirms her didactic impulse at the end of her new book, the final book, describing her plans for *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*:

> I thought if I wrote a book, I would have to examine the quality in the human spirit that continues to rise despite the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.
>
> Rise out of the physical pain and the psychological cruelties.
>
> Rise from being victims of rape and abuse and abandonment to the determination to be no victim of any kind.
>
> Rise and be prepared to move on and ever on.

Enter, then, a passage such as this one:

> We carried the badge of a barbarous history sewn to our dark skins . . . those actions which appeared to be childish most often were exhibitions of bravado, not unlike humming a jazz tune while walking into a gathering of the Ku Klux Klan. I drank the gin and ignored the tea.

Obviously both passages are meant to be lyrical, and lyricism often submerges the specifics of reality in a larger truth. It is no surprise, then, that Angelou's memoirs often veer into the theatrical.

SHE IS CERTAINLY alive to the dangerous seductions of the black victim routine. Dressing down some whites for a perceived insult, Angelou purrs: "There was a delicious silence. For the moment, I had them and their uneasiness in the palm of my hand. The sense of power was intoxicating." But shortly afterward she acknowledges that "the old habits of withdrawing into righteous indignation or lashing out furiously against insults were not applicable in this circumstance. Oh, the holiness of always being the injured party. The historically oppressed can find not only sanctity but safety in the state of victimization." Holiness, sanctity: the words are revealing, as they apply to the general tone of all her books.

Angelou's memoirs are really tracts, and this explains the succinctness and the transparency of her prose, its striking and even jarring simplicity. These books sometimes seem written for children rather than adults. They are all on the short side, and divided into ever shorter chapters as the series progresses: the final installment is more a succession of vignettes than a narrative at all. But this format makes sense when we realize that Angelou is, in her way, preaching to the masses. Malcolm X apparently sensed this as one of Angelou's skills, taking her on as a deputy out of admiration for her talent for talking to the common man. We never quite glean this from Angelou's presentation of her "character"—the Queen's English of "I have done such harm to Clyde" seems unlikely to have struck a chord on 125th Street—but the style of the memoirs is the tip-off.

Explaining in *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* why she finally could not feel that Africa was her true home, she describes being unable to shake a feeling of self-conscious displacement: "Here I am, Maya Angelou, dancing in Africa." This unwittingly sums up the reader's impression of all six books: Angelou striding through the narrative as a kind of stand-in figure for the Black American in Troubled Times. In a tough period in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, she portrays her mental state this way: "I had written a juicy melodrama in which I was to be the star. Pathetic, poignant, isolated. I planned to drift out of the wings, a little girl martyr."

Hence she is less interested in portraying herself and her son as individuals than in celebrating the general African American cult of the mother. No wonder we can

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never "smell" Guy as a real boy; she is offering only an archetype of the black American son. Similarly, the self-involved diva Vivian Baxter would be in for quite a bit of criticism in a memoir by a younger black woman in this era of exquisite awareness of the psychological legacies of faulty parenting; but Angelou's goal was to fashion Vivian into an idealized mother "character" for herself. And, as it happens, Odetta has a walk-on. As we would predict, we learn nothing of what she was like as a person or a performer. Instead Angelou has Odetta briefly regale her with exactly the kind of self-satisfied aphoristic wisdom with which she would irritate my roommate twenty-five years later.

Angelou's writings are the product of a worse and blissfully bygone America. White readers who feel enlightened enough about race issues to have wearied of being lectured about them may be put off by these books today. And a black person likely would not, and really should not, write a memoir in this style today. I must admit a guilty relief that the last volume ends in the late 1960s. I suspect that Angelou's chocolate icons gliding through a vaudeville version of black history could speak only fitfully about our times, when Jesse Jackson (and even Al Sharpton) has replaced Martin Luther King, and victim politics has taken its place among the varieties of communal uplift, and black success has gone from happenstance to norm, and most African countries have slid into violent black-on-black despair.

During a fracas with white school administrators in *The Heart of a Woman*, Angelou asks: "How could the two women understand a black mother who had nothing to give her son except a contrived arrogance?" "Contrived arrogance" is exactly what Angelou seeks to give her readers. An outsider today might read this as the same kind of lordly superciliousness that my roommate sensed in Odetta. But contrived arrogance was once a useful and even natural form of defense against bigotry. Contrary to the insistence of a noisy fringe, it serves no valuable purpose today, and in this, Angelou's books date themselves. I don't quite see how readers can find art in these books, but it must be said that she has helped to pave the way for contemporary black writers who are able to enjoy the luxury of being merely individuals, no longer representatives of the race, only themselves. ■

In Praise of Balance

By PETER BERKOWITZ

The Ship of State: Statecraft and Politics from Ancient Greece to Democratic America by Norma Thompson

(Yale University Press, 243 pp., $35)

BALANCE IS BORING, or so in the roaring 1990s it often seemed. We kindled to originals, hearkened to the outspoken and the over-the-top, applauded the outstanding and the extraordinary. What could be more bland and bourgeois, especially when the money was rolling in and the sky was the limit, than balanced diets and balanced budgets and balanced judgments? Don't be divided, be single-minded, exhorted the sages of success. Take a stand, make a difference, get your name up in lights, counseled the conscience of the educated and the ambitious. It's not that we didn't value our comfort and security, but what captured our imagination and excited our admiration was the novel, the cutting-edge, the extreme.

September 2001 compelled us to rethink (or so I ardently hope) many notions; but the truth is that even before our adversaries transformed our passenger jets into weapons of mass destruction and our post offices into a delivery system for bioterrorism, we should have been able to sense that the claims of single-mindedness needed to be balanced against the claims of balance. For our moral and political life, even in the absence of crisis or craziness, constantly invites us to choose: shall we honor the observed differences between men and women or seek to overcome them? Shall we respect political opinions that differ from our own or try to rout them from the field? Shall we live as best we can according to the dictates of reason and the demands of faith, or shall we embrace one and heed those of its imperatives which call for the rejection of the other?

In fact, we are divided about single-mindedness. And there is an excellent reason for seeking intellectual and emotional diversification: our world provides a variety of conflicting goods, and to pursue one with devotion entails the loss of many others. Still, a suspicion nags. Isn't what presents itself as balance—in relations between the sexes, in politics, and in ultimate questions—really a mask for complacency or pandering or failure of nerve?

MILL SEEMS TO have pointed a way, a liberal way, out of this quandary. He proposed a blend of balance and single-mindedness. He understood individuality to be a term of distinction and saw it as grounded in strong passion disciplined by virtue and guided by reason. The development of strong and distinctive opinions was an essential part of the formation of truly independent character. For this purpose, society must not only tolerate individuals who engage competing points of view, it must encourage them to do so. What is most commonly taken away from Mill's classic exploration of the liberty of thought and discussion in the second chapter of *On Liberty* concerns the danger of complacency: in the absence of challenge, our opinions, even when they are true, grow weak and flabby. Yet Mill had another and deeper reason for encouraging the liberty of thought and discussion. It concerned the danger of partiality and incompleteness. Since our opinions, even under the best circumstances, tend to embrace only a portion of the truth, and because opposing opinions rarely turn out to be entirely wrong, it is crucial to supplement our opinions with alternative points of view.

The liberal way is a spirit or an approach, not a procedure or an algorithm. It does not prescribe an optimal blend of balance and single-mindedness, certainly not concerning the questions about which we care most. Indeed, it might even be said to exhibit a decided tilt toward single-mindedness on the subject of personal freedom. So when it comes to relations between the sexes (as Mill makes clear in *The Subjection of Women*), women as well as men must be encouraged to think for themselves, to develop their individual talents, and to become autonomous individuals, even though this may lead to a slighting by both sexes of the virtues of sociability and caregiving that traditionally have been thought to be women's special province. In politics (as Mill maintains in *Considerations on Representative Government*), the liberal way requires an appreciation of the need to accommodate

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both the party of permanence and order and the party of progress and freedom, though the liberal argument for balance in politics prizes permanence and order for the contribution that they make to progress and freedom, and not for themselves or for the sake of any other human goods that they might promote. As for reason and faith (as Mill explains in his *Essays on Religion*), the liberal way is committed to keeping an open mind by rationally considering faith's claims. In practice, though, this means that only the part of religion that conforms to the demands of individual autonomy is welcome in public and carries a viable claim to truth and respect.

All its blessings notwithstanding, the spirit of democracy does not make the blending of balance and single-mindedness any easier. As our liberalism, in the guise of reason and fairness, tilts us in our undertakings toward its favored good, freedom, so democracy, under the same guise, inclines us to embrace its highest ideal, which is equality, not only in those spheres where justice demands it but also in those where justice does not and perhaps should not. Democracy presses for an equality beyond the liberal imperative for equality in respect of rights and equality before the law, a democratization of equality that in practice often looks and feels like a demand for uniformity in thought and action. The reason for this excess is that differences—between men and women, between political orientations and objectives, between the secular and the religious—breed distinctions at which the democratic conscience looks askance, and which it works to rein in and wear down and paper over. In contemporary America, there is good reason to wonder whether any power or practice or principle can withstand democracy's progress.

In her iconoclastic and intelligent book, Norma Thompson argues that democracy has indeed induced in us a loss of balance. The adoption of countervailing measures is necessary, she contends, for our own sake as well as for the sake of democracy. Following Tocqueville, whose study of "several oppositions—between aristocracy and democracy, between the spirit of freedom and the spirit of religion, and between masculine and feminine spheres of influence" provided a stimulus for her book, Thompson explores "the intellectual challenge for democrats of holding alternatives in mind at the same time." To achieve a better balance, we need to re-orient our thinking—especially our thinking about men and women, their relations, and how "masculine and feminine spheres of influence" mix, in individuals and in political life.

Historical studies can play a pivotal role in this re-orientation. Rejecting the contemporary conceit according to which previous ideas and forms of political life are at best "flawed precursors to our own prescribed arrangements," Thompson invites her reader on a brisk and learned tour of several high points in the history of political philosophy. Her destinations are the ancient Greek polis, the modern state, and democratic America. In the case of the ancients, her selection of representative authors is unexceptional—Homer, Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle—though the inclusion of epic poets, historians, and philosophers invites a question about the omission of tragedians. For the moderns, her eclectic focus on Machiavelli, Edmund Burke, Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Rousseau provides valuable and uncommon juxtapositions. But her coupling of Gertrude Stein with Tocqueville as together providing the key to understanding the challenges posed by democratic America is, as she acknowledges, somewhat eccentric: it yields both illumination and the most strained arguments in the book.

Still, Thompson's lapses do not prevent her from vindicating the salutary methodological point that, far from slavishly reflecting the prevailing views of the day, as democratic dogma often teaches they must, philosophy and literature may rise above and provide a necessary criticism of their times. And in numerous ways and from a variety of angles she successfully defends her central substantive claim that ancients and moderns are impressively united in agreement that success for a political regime as well as for an individual depends upon a weaving of masculine and feminine propensities—a weaving that, in the nature of things, is always, even under the best of circumstances, on the edge of unraveling.

Less persuasively, Thompson also advances a subsidiary thesis about the relation between literature and politics. Literary forms adopted by political thinkers have substantive significance, she argues, such that they "can be ranked as better or worse at ameliorating the perceived shortcomings of their political communities, and of achieving a crucial balance of masculine and feminine principles." This is confused. For one thing, literary forms do not ameliorate political problems, though they may illuminate them. And Thompson goes too far in accommodating postmodern sensibilities when she contends that her study of literary and philosophical writings reveals that "'our solution' is as makeshift as any." While she is right to warn "democrats to be wary of their imperious and unitary ways," what she refers to as "our solution," or liberal democracy, is firmly—and properly—anchored in our belief in the natural freedom and equality of all, a belief that is the very ground from which we reason, however vulnerable, imperfect, and alienating the political "solution" it anchors may sometimes be.

Thompson aspires to more—"my aim is to recast the tradition"—than she can conceivably deliver. In places her argument is disjointed or forced or rambling. Without much explanation, it reduces whole eras to an idea or two, and reduces these ideas to their expression in a few seminal texts or even a few seminal passages. And despite its professed commitment to reconciling rival principles, it repeatedly flirts with the reduction of politics to rhetoric, as if steering a ship and speaking about steering a ship were one and the same. And yet the general overreaching and the assorted shortcomings are more than offset by Thompson's deft and arresting observations about the balance between male and female principles that must be achieved by captain and crew if the ship of state is to sail smoothly and safely.

Whereas many of her colleagues assume that the ancient Greeks have nothing to offer on the question but exclusion, oppression, and misogyny, Thompson finds that "Greek profundity extends even into reflections on gender." On Thompson's reading, the *Odyssey*, in recounting Odysseus's great wanderings on his return home from the Trojan War to his wife and son, demonstrates that the household (*oikos*) and the city (*polis*) are by nature inextricably connected. It is the rare gift of "like-mindedness" that sustains Odysseus in his absence from home, and that he praises as the highest expression of the bond between husband and wife: "No finer, greater gift in the world than that .../ when man and woman possess their home, two minds,/two hearts that work as one." To survive his wanderings, moreover, Odysseus must repeatedly exercise not only his famed cunning but also the feminine virtues of indirection and patient forbearance. At the same time, to keep her many suitors at bay in hopes that her husband will someday return, Penelope is compelled to innovate and take risks in the manner of men. When Odysseus returns and with the help of his son Telemachus slays his wife's suitors, takes back his home, and re-unites with Penelope, he comes full circle: the epic adventure that began with a disruption of a household—the seizing of Helen by the Trojans—ends with the restoration of a household.

Sometimes ancient Greek authors, Thompson observes, reveal their appre-

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ciation of the importance of women and the household by demonstrating the disastrous political consequences that stem from their neglect. Although Thucydides says little about women in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, this is in part, Thompson maintains, because the decisive figures in his history, the generals and the statesmen whose speeches and deeds he presents, said little. Yet Thucydides does not merely reproduce their silence and their oversight, according to Thompson. By drawing attention to how, despite his great rhetorical gifts, Athens's Pericles forgets the household, elevates love of city over devotion to hearth and home, and promotes in his fellow citizens a loss of a sense of proportion (most dramatically demonstrated in the ill-fated Sicilian expedition), Thucydides distances himself from Pericles's suppression of the feminine and brings into focus the costs of Athenian one-sidedness.

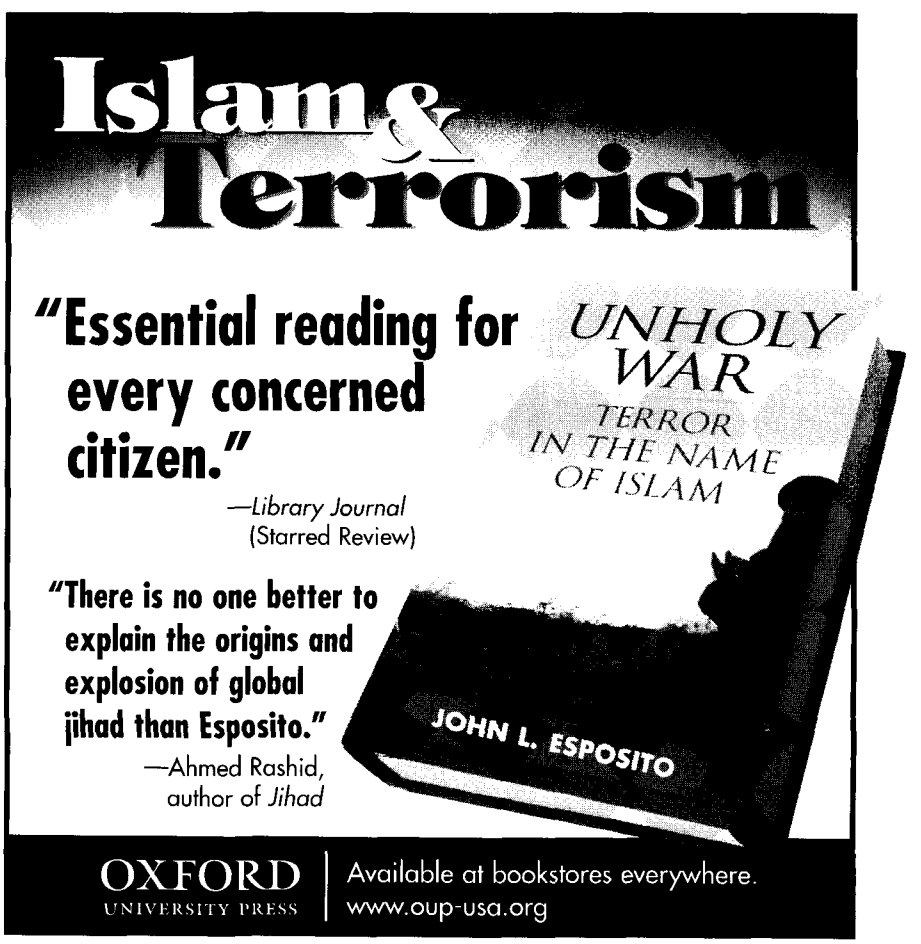
In the realm of theory, Aristotle also opposed one-sidedness, including the one-sidedness that suppresses the female principle. To be sure, one finds in his thinking familiar exclusions and affronts to democratic ideals: the denial of full participation to women in politics and in virtue, the support for natural slavery, the defense of the contemplative life as the best life. Still, Aristotle articulates the outlines of a well-ordered polis that is (in Thompson's account) distinctively receptive to the feminine. The receptivity is both explicit and implicit. For one thing, Aristotle introduces the household as a constitutive and irreducible element of the polis. For another, he makes the achievement of a balance between the rival claims of the propertied (oligarchy) and the people (democracy) a defining feature of the well-ordered polis. In addition, his understanding of moral virtue—according to which the mean or standard for right conduct is the "mean relative to us," the standard relative to the concrete individual and the particular circumstances in which he must act—reflects the feminine propensity to appreciate context and its complications. Thompson makes a compelling case that by expounding the idea of an objective standard that is nevertheless highly sensitive to context, by providing a kind of anti-formula formula for moral virtue—excellence consists in doing the right thing at the right time in the right way for the right reason—Aristotle provides an understanding of ethics that surpasses in insight and suitability the childish relativism and the arid rationalism into which today's democratic theorists constantly slip.

In Plato, too, Thompson finds an ally in the effort to give female principles their due, indeed an "ingenuity in the use of gender." In the Platonic dialogues, Thompson reminds, philosophy is "gendered female," and Socrates singles out for special honor his female teachers: Diotima, who taught him about love, the sole subject in which he claims to be a master; and Aspasia, who taught him about rhetoric, in which he constantly shows his mastery. Thompson might have added that Plato's Socrates seeks to re-interpret the manly virtue of courage as receiving decisive expression in the talk and interiority of fearless philosophical speculation. But Thompson forces matters when she tries to elicit lessons about democratic statecraft from the form of Plato's writings:

> The model of writing that Platonic dialogues embody is illustrative of the craft most called for in democracy, as Plato maneuvers between the spontaneity of self-expression and the discipline of self-rule. He shows us a careful balancing of opposites, over against democracy's predilection to settle on one element of dichotomies: *talk*, not writing, and unequivocal talk at that. The democratic impulse is to reduce everything to the lowest common denominator, to treat different individuals as indifferently distinct bodies. The example of Platonic dialogue suggests that democratic statecraft may be essential if democracy is not to degenerate into the disruption and chaos that led the ancient thinkers to fear it as a path toward eventual tyranny.

There is a parallel between Plato's dialectical preservation of conceptual antitheses and the statesman who, in the face of democracy's tendency to level moral and political distinctions, arbitrary as well as vital, must find a way to balance competing interests and integrate countervailing principles. Yet poetry, even the philosophical poetry that shows the necessity of practical judgment in politics, differs mightily from the statesman's exercise of such judgment.

EARLY MODERN THINKERS, argues Thompson, are as undeserving as ancient authors of the charge of anti-femaleness routinely leveled against them. To see why, it is necessary to go beyond their most sensational statements and see how the thinkers themselves complicate matters. Machiavelli, modernity's most incendiary founding father, notoriously asserted in *The Prince* that "fortune is a woman" who must be beaten and struck down; but, as Thompson points out, he also emphasized that, like women (as he understood them), fortune in the end remains in control, deciding who she will let win her and with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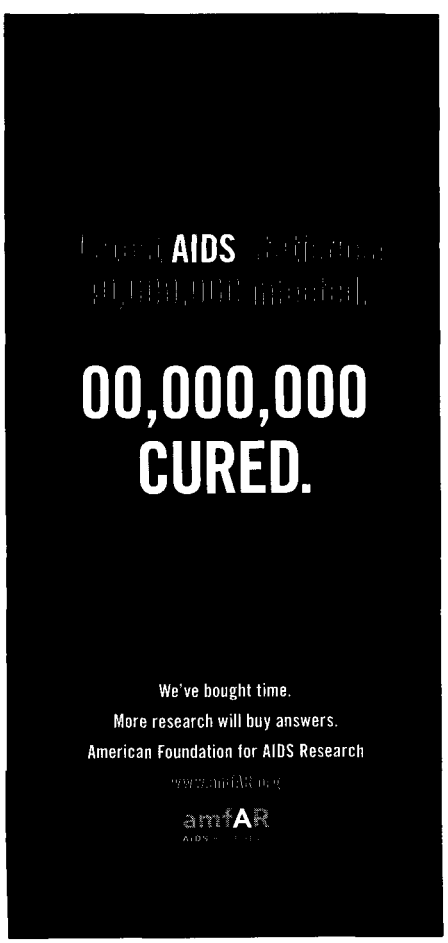
whom she will be friends. Machiavelli is also condemned for his typically cool and calculating account in *The Discourses* of the political utility of the rape of Lucretia. But in *Mandragola*, as Thompson delightfully recounts, Machiavelli reworks the classic story as comedy, transforming a wronged woman acted upon by others into a shrewd manipulator in her own right capable of taking advantage of the bumbling male would-be manipulators who surround her in order to secure her social position and sexual satisfaction.

Almost four hundred years after Machiavelli insinuated that female astuteness and cunning could, and in many cases should, overcome male ferocity (and foolhardiness), Edmund Burke, in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, attacked a different aspect of the male disposition, the tendency to seek transparent clarity about morals and politics through the exercise of abstract reason. Ironically, it was the unleashing of the male propensity to obtain mastery through reason, argued Burke, that lay behind the French revolutionaries' repudiation of their responsibilities, inherited from tradition, to protect women and the feminine:

> Little did I dream that I should have seen such disaster fallen upon the Queen of France in a nation of gallant men, in a nation of men of honor and cavaliers. I thought ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to avenge *even a look* that threatened her with insult—but the age of chivalry is gone. That of sophisters, economists, and calculators has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever.

When a certain feminine modesty is abandoned as a guiding moral and political principle, when "all the decent drapery of life is to be torn off," the complexities and the depths of human nature are not revealed but obscured, for it is part of our nature to make laws, to observe social conventions, and to embody wise restraints in tradition. To which Mary Wollstonecraft, in the *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, replied that it is foolish to sentimentalize the feminine principle, and to denigrate rights and the universal reason in which they are grounded. Appreciating the merit in both Burke and Wollstonecraft, Thompson finds in the late-eighteenth-century male defense of the feminine and female defense of the masculine compelling evidence of the inadequacy of commonplace generalizations about the influence of male and female propensities in politics, and of the enduring challenge of effective reconciliation.

The disturbing lesson of modern literature and philosophy, in Thompson's account, is that the challenge is all but insuperable. In greater agreement apparently with Burke than with Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley depicts in *Frankenstein* the knowledge-seeking and world-mastering impulses, inimical to every harmonization, embedded in the spirit of Enlightenment. Victor Frankenstein's exploitation of science to play God not only produces a monster cut off from human ties and touch, but also leads to the destruction of his own domestic tranquillity. The message from Rousseau, the outstanding modern student of love and friendship, is no more comforting. In *Émile*, a wise tutor supervises a comprehensive education, stretching from childhood to adulthood, directed toward citizenship and marriage. But even the carefully contrived domestic bliss that Émile and Sophie achieve proves vulnerable. Rousseau's sequel reveals that all the tutor's artifice cannot save Émile from the betrayals of his wife's adulterous affair.



Modern democracy heightens, or gives its distinctive twist, to the challenge of harmonization. According to Tocqueville, the powerful social force that modern democracy brings to the fore, in the name of equality, is a relentless drive to uniformity in thought and conduct. When he journeyed through America in the 1830s, Tocqueville perceived women as checking this dangerous drive. While men were governed by the calculating principle of "self-interest rightly understood," women's education revolved around virtue and self-discipline. Women, who stayed at home out of the public sphere, were the guardians of mores, of the habits of heart and mind on which decent conduct, in private life as well as in public life, depended. Tocqueville understood that their roles "demand much abnegation on the women's part and a continual sacrifice of pleasure for the sake of business," but in this abnegation and sacrifice he saw a portion of women's superiority.

As Thompson emphasizes, Tocqueville recognized the equality of women as well as the cost they bore by staying at home and acting as the custodians of morals and manners. Moreover, "few authors believed with more urgency that it is impossible to contain the spirit of egalitarianism." Yet she concludes that Tocqueville's analysis is unconvincing, owing to "a literary form which cannot sustain his ambitions to counter the homogenizing tendencies of democracy on gender." This is an odd charge to lay at Tocqueville's feet, as if any literary form could counter a social force or a condition, as if ideas cannot survive or overflow forms. The instability or contradiction in domestic relations that Tocqueville's analysis brought to light—democracy in America called upon women to play a role that was inconsistent with the equality and openness to which democracy was devoted—was not a product of rhetoric, however inventive and refined. Nor could rhetoric fix it. And though women have achieved spectacular and just gains in the public since he wrote, it is by no means obvious that we have found an alternative way to ensure the preservation and the transmission of the habits of heart on which democracy depends.

Thompson's confusing effort to seek political solutions in literary forms culminates in the baffling suggestion that Gertrude Stein's work involves "an attempt to set forth precepts for balancing a political system that strains ceaselessly against balance." Thompson concedes that Stein is at first glance an unlikely model of the democratic theorist. Indeed, Stein's writings abound in the very qualities that Tocqueville diagnosed as symptoms of democratic decadence: a rage for novelty, a disregard for form, a craving for mass appeal, an oscillation between trivial matters and grand speculations. But the deeper Stein, Thompson argues, is the "Socratic Stein." This Stein experiments with styles, exhibits curiosity in all human types, and in her most popular work, *The Autobiogra-*

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phy of Alice B. Toklas, in which she adopts her lover's persona, she combats the despotism of public opinion through the technique of constantly changing perspectives, shifting subjects, inventing facts, and altering history.

Whatever Stein's literary achievement, surely it cannot plausibly be said to represent a solution to the problem of democratic statecraft. Nor, contrary to Thompson, can Stein's depictions of how she negotiated her highly idiosyncratic relations with her brother, with Picasso, with the heady group of artists and writers in her circle, and with Toklas be seen as providing a model for the democratic reconciliation of male and female propensities. (There is also the unsavory matter of Stein's own political sympathies in occupied France during World War II.) At most, Stein's writings display a solution to the problem of democratic existence for a particular gifted writer.

What impels Thompson, in the attempt to deal with the one-sidedness induced by our democratic inclinations, to make do with a sort of politicized aestheticism, and to offer only the trite suggestion that individual self-creation is the solution to the problems posed by modern democracy? Isn't the dogma of self-creation a characteristic conceit that flatters the democrat's sense of sovereignty and independence, itself a lopsided solution that tends to neglect the claims of reason and convention and duty and faith?

A part of the explanation for this disappointing culmination lies in Thompson's persistent overestimation of the power of rhetoric. "In Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Burke, and others," Thompson asserts in the conclusion to her book, "the essence of statecraft is rhetoric, a rhetoric that displays the danger of imbalance and, either directly or indirectly, contains the required correctives." But this is mistaken, both concerning the views held by the thinkers in question and concerning the actual truth of the matter. For one thing, it implies that thinkers rather than office-holders are the master statesmen. For another, rhetoric may display imbalance and clarify correctives, but it cannot on its own restore balance or correct things. For this, something more is needed. Words must not be mistaken for deeds, even if words are sometimes also deeds. While the art of rhetoric is indispensable to statecraft, the essence of statecraft is not rhetoric but judgment or prudence, which Burke called "the god of this lower world." Judgment is grounded in experience of human affairs and knowledge of human nature. To get things done requires judgment, including judgments about rhetoric, about what must be said and how it must be said in order to get things done. For the sake of democracy and for the sake of justice, rhetoric, which is as useful to the vicious despot and conniving demagogue as it is to the enlightened statesman, must remain judgment's handmaiden.

Thompson knows this. That is why she also offers in her conclusion a more modest and sensible understanding, more consistent with the primary thrust of her many and valuable interpretive insights, of how the study of classic literary and philosophical texts can provide a salutary corrective to democratic lopsidedness. By introducing readers to possibilities and alternatives that might otherwise remain hidden or inaccessible, such study helps to combat our complacency and partiality. Indeed, such study enables one to formulate a question that seems vital to understanding moral and political life but that remains hidden and inaccessible to most card-carrying political scientists: "What aspects of human nature, when recognized and kept in some basic form of balance, provide the strongest foundations for the agreements and arrangements that a flourishing political community needs?" To pursue such an investigation would force into the open important issues that democrats (and political scientists) tend to treat as settled or uninteresting, a conceit that is another form of democratic lopsidedness.

Among such issues, certainly, is the status of the propensities, the qualities, or the characteristics that Thompson calls male and female. Many will think, under the influence of the democratic impulse to uniformity, that the whole idea of sexually specific propensities is rubbish. Surely our world furnishes no end of examples of women who have learned to be cold and calculating and cutthroat, and men who know how to cry and to care for babies and to confess their feelings. Some will think that such propensities as we have are real but culture-bound, socially constructed, and capable of endless manipulation and revision. Some will think that our propensities are hardwired in our genes, and the attempt to resist nature futile or harmful. Some may believe that male and female propensities are inscribed in our souls.

What cannot plausibly be denied is that every male and every female, every relationship and every political order, is a mixture of what have been traditionally thought of as manly or assertive qualities—those propensities that cluster around courage, including hard-headedness and hard-heartedness—and those that have been traditionally thought of as female or caregiving qualities—those that cluster around gentleness, including compassion and the tender sentiments. Since both sets of qualities are essential to a full human life and a well-ordered politics, the aim is to strike the balance, to weave them together, in ourselves, in our friendships and our loves, in our political institutions.

Balance in the human spirit, which must not be mistaken for ambivalence or splitting the difference or playing both sides against the middle, is neither bland nor bourgeois nor boring. It is not a resigned concession to partiality, but a bold gamble on wholeness. It is not the midway point between virtue and vice, but an artful arrangement of virtues that enables them to supplement and to strengthen rather than to subvert each other. Since it involves an openness to the variety of human passions and possibilities, balance is a liberal imperative. Since courage without gentleness is destructive and gentleness without courage is defenseless, balance is a human good. Since balance is, for men and for women, not only an extreme but also a perfection, it is genuinely a thing of beauty to behold. ■

The Next Bend in the Road

If there's a mention of eyelashes, then it's about Osip.
—Nadezhda Mandelstam

The young man with long thick eyelashes is
unapologetically drunk with the world's beauty
despite or possibly because of the hollowness at its core
which he confirms in the slightly dead timbre
of the distant church bells sounding the hour.
Meanwhile the little horses jog onward without
the least appearance of strain, their breath issuing
visibly in twin dissolving plumes of cloud,
and the extraordinarily pretty woman (scarcely
more than a girl) whose head rests on the young man's
shoulder, although she has a husband to whom
she will return, is for the moment all his. Just beyond
the next bend in the road, or if not the next
the bend after that, still hidden by the towering
fir trees, their dark drooping vigorous branches
loaded with snow (I forgot to say that this
is a winter scene, that the youthful lovers are in
a sleigh, that they are both poets, that they will come
to similar ends), the Revolution waits.

Michael Fried

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WASHINGTON DIARIST

Peaceful Protest

WHEN VENEZUELAN President Hugo Chávez was deposed last month—and then reinstated two days later—the sound of banging pots and pans filled the streets of Caracas. Nothing unusual there: For decades Latin Americans have thumped on kitchenware in political protest. But there weren't as many people hammering spoons into saucepans as the noise level implied. Rather than exert themselves, many Caraqueños simply purchased a compact disc, entitled *Caserolas Contra Chávez*, featuring the *sound* of clanging silverware. They then popped it into their boom boxes and turned up the volume. Voilà: political protest.

MY MOTHER IS VENEZUELAN, AND every year during my childhood we spent a two-month sojourn with her family there. Then, as now, Venezuelan society evidenced a certain lassitude, a why-bang-a-pan-when-you-can-play-a-compact-disc mindset that may help explain not only how Venezuela became the basket case it is today but how Venezuelans endure their national misfortune with such aplomb. The mindset can be traced, at least in part, to the country's vast oil reserves—the largest outside the Middle East—and the enormous cash windfall Venezuela reaped in the 1970s, when oil was selling at $36 per barrel. Oil money allowed the government to finance a paternalistic economic state without suffering the quadruple-digit inflation that plagued other Latin American countries. Generous subsidies and an artificially strong currency provided the good life with little corresponding sacrifice, and so Venezuelans embarked on a decade-long party. For a time they were the biggest per-capita consumers of champagne in the world. Even middle-class Caraqueños jetted to Miami for weekend shopping sprees. And the country elected leader after leader who promised to keep the festivities going.

THROUGH A MIXTURE OF PROFOUND incompetence and breathtaking cupidity, these leaders ran the country into the ground. During its salad years Venezuela utterly failed to diversify its economy; and when the price of oil dropped in the mid-1980s the nation found itself without a backup plan. The result is that today 80 percent of the populace is mired in poverty. But if oil money engendered a life-of-Riley mentality that undermined any effort to foster genuine economic development, it also insulated the country from the political violence that wracked other parts of Latin America. It's almost hard to remember, but Venezuela was once a trailblazer for democracy—electing its politicians from 1958 onward—even as much of the continent was plagued by right-wing dictatorships and left-wing guerrillas (or, in the case of Nicaragua, the reverse). As a result, Venezuela never suffered the kind of bloodshed seen in Argentina or Chile in the '70s or in Colombia today. Indeed, when groups allegedly linked to President Chávez fired on demonstrators last month, Venezuelans recoiled in horror and the president fell immediately, if temporarily.

I WAS STRUCK BY BOTH PHENOMENA—the lack of serious purpose and the corollary easygoing outlook—when I moved to Venezuela six years ago to work as an economic reporter for Bloomberg News covering Caracas's economic free fall. The ineptitude of the country's economic mandarins was astonishing. An engineer, rather than an economist, served as finance minister; he occasionally confused basic financial concepts during his infrequent press conferences. His minions didn't inspire much confidence either. I once spent a frenzied afternoon trying to track down a senior finance official. First he was at lunch. Then he was napping. Finally, after my twelfth or so phone call, his secretary muttered that he'd left for the day. And no, he wasn't reachable at home.

BUT THE FLIP SIDE OF THE COUNTRY'S flakiness was a disarming bonhomie; it was hard not to warm to the Venezuelan capacity for wringing a good time from the most unlikely of environments. For me, perhaps the best example of this phenomenon occurred in 1996 when an International Monetary Fund (IMF) team arrived in the country to negotiate an economic bailout package. While my journalist colleagues and I camped out in the lobby of the finance ministry to report on the talks, a radio reporter told his station managers to play music to fill the time between updates. Suddenly, a couple was dancing salsa, gliding along the marble floor, carefully skirting tape recorders and notebooks. More reporters joined in, until eventually a colleague extended his hand to me: Would I like to dance? I looked at the sashaying hips and shook my head. What would the IMF delegates think if they chanced upon this scene? *Ay, Alexandra*, my would-be lothario said, *¿por qué no?* Well, why not indeed?

IT WASN'T ONLY ON THE JOB THAT I found myself bowled over by Venezuelans' good humor in the face of frustration and pain. Shortly after I arrived in the country, my family received some devastating news: My grandmother, who lived in Caracas, was in the advanced stages of breast cancer. On the day she was to learn whether or not the disease had spread to her lymph nodes, I came home to the sound of music wafting from the balcony. Ah, I thought, she must be OK. My extended family had congregated in the living room, where my flamenco-dancing 15-year-old cousin was giving an impromptu performance. Before I could approach my grandmother, however, an aunt pulled me aside to whisper that the cancer had spread. Why, I stammered, were we throwing a party after receiving such grim news? My aunt seemed surprised by the question. Because it made more sense to enjoy ourselves together than to weep together, she replied. As I poured myself a double whiskey and soda, I ruminated on the extent of my family's dysfunction.

BUT WHEN I CAUGHT THE CREASES OF pride that marked my grandmother's face as she watched her grandchild dance, it was clear my aunt had a point. Why not try to make the family matriarch happy in the face of such a frightening diagnosis? My grandmother has been in remission for five years now, and while her good health is no doubt due to the excellent medical attention she has received, I can't help but suspect that the family's joy in the face of catastrophe played a role as well.

A CONVERSATION I HAD WITH ANOTHER cousin a few weeks ago reminded me of that day in my grandmother's house. I was eager to hear his take on the political debacle not long after Chávez reassumed office, but he insisted he could only speak for a few minutes. An urge to dance salsa had overtaken him, he explained. For a moment I was dumbfounded, but then I thought, why not? The ability to cultivate happiness can't be measured in GDP, but when the objective indicators suggest misery, it could be the country's saving grace.

ALEXANDRA STARR

ALEXANDRA STARR is writer living in Washington.

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How (Some) New York City Parents Choose Schools

A lengthy story in the April 28 *New York Times* describes how some New York City parents select schools. This excerpt illustrates their many choices:

[In New York City] communities like Cobble Hill and adjacent Boerum Hill, parents have many appealing options. This area, like certain other neighborhoods — the West 70's and the East 80's in Manhattan and Park Slope in Brooklyn — is home to a growing contingent of affluent families who have attractive public and private choices nearby. For [these] parents ... private schools are plentiful [and] are all within walking distance. The area has public elementary schools ... that are superior to many in the city, and two public "schools of choice" that are application-only....

Parental School Choice is Widespread ... Unless You're Poor.

The Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO) hopes that the *Times* soon will provide comparable coverage of how less affluent parents choose schools. For low-income families in particular, the options are far, far more limited.

Nationally, the parents of Cobble Hill and Boerum Hill are more the norm than the exception. Indeed, as scholars Richard Elmore and Bruce Fuller explain:

Choice is everywhere in American education. It is manifest in the residential choices made by families [and] in the housing prices found in neighborhoods [and] when families, sometimes at great financial sacrifice, decide to send their children to private schools.... [I]n all instances, these choices ... are strongly shaped by the wealth, ethnicity, and social status of parents and their neighborhoods." (Who Chooses? Who Loses? Culture, Institutions, and the Unequal Effects of School Choice, *Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1996.)*

The parents in the *Times* story, and those described in *Who Chooses? Who Loses?*, underscore the main theme of BAEO's two-year old public information campaign: parental school choice is widespread — unless you're poor.

BAEO believes strongly that the widespread availability of educational choices is positive. BAEO will continue its quest to make such choices available to low-income black families as well.

baeo
Black Alliance for Educational Options

For more information go to: www.schoolchoiceinfo.org or www.baeo.org

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